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Breath on Glass: Transforming Science into Story

Jennifer Cryer BSc. MA. PhD.

Submitted to the University of Wales in fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Swansea University

2010

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Summary

Scientific progress has historically increased anxiety in society about man's relationship with nature. *In vitro* fertilisation, cloning and regenerative stem-cell-based therapies have raised fears about transgressive raids on the boundaries which secure human identity. This thesis seeks to explore the power of realist fiction to respond to both the process and ethics of scientific endeavour in a contemporary setting. *Breath on Glass*, a novel, follows the lives of two young researchers and their family relationships, both inside and outside of the laboratory, exploring the ways in which scientific tensions might give rise to personal ones. In parallel, it considers the ways in which the need for the advanced technology of fertility treatment impacts on their non-scientific relative. In the accompanying essay, the requirement for, and the use of literature to act as a conciliator between science and humanity is discussed and the narrative of science and the narratives of the individual scientists are compared.

Declaration and Statements

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed.....

Date..... 22.09.10.....

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated.
Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Breath on Glass

Prelude.

You don't remember this, but before you were born there was someone else that you might have been. Before you were conceived - as if anyone could pinpoint that moment - a choice got made, between you and someone else.

Most people believe that the egg, your mother's egg, waiting to be fertilised by your father's sperm, has only one set of chromosomes. They imagine that it needs another set from Dad, to make it whole. But that's not true: it has two sets. It isn't a haploid cell it's a diploid. It already possesses a full complement, twenty six for a human.

The sperm cell has only half that number. It really needs some more to make it whole. So there it goes, swimming through the cervix, using up all the energy in its lashing tail. When it touches the egg, the tail drops off, and its mitochondrial DNA, the sort that you always inherit from your mother, falls away with it. So the sperm, all male now that the thrashing about has used up all your Grandma's energy, penetrates the egg and activates it. It's only then that the two sets of DNA in the egg separate. One set gets its own nuclear envelope, it gets to stay, but the other is pushed to the outer edge. No one knows why one set gets chosen and the other is banished to the perimeter, but the unlucky one never gets to join with the male. It just wastes away.

The one that stays, it doesn't bind to the male straight away. The mother's and the father's DNA sit tight in their own nuclear envelopes, weighing each other up. Then the cell begins to split; there are going to be two cells so they have to get on with it, commit themselves to a common purpose and share themselves out.

You have to wonder how it is for that spare set of maternal DNA, disintegrating in the zona pellucida. It might have been you, but as it is, there's just this ghost inside you, the person you might have been: the other one of you that would have said yes, when you said no; that would have gone, when you stayed; someone who might have lived your life quite differently. Perhaps she's still there inside you, wanting her way, instead of yours.

Chapter 1

Tireless fans forced air into a cataract: an invisible wall that separated Rhea from the sample, half a gram of human fat sucked from the thigh of another young researcher who was having a cartilage repair. The flow resisted her as she pushed her hands inside the tissue culture hood but she pressed forward and breached it, her skin covered by latex gloves and the cuffs of her laboratory coat tight around her wrists.

Inside the hood, she touched the adipose tissue with her scalpel. Gently, gently she stroked it. She knew better than to risk pressing down. Any pressure and the scalpel would give way; not the steel - that was strong - but the plastic handle would snap and the thin blade fly off, lacerating whatever it touched. As she transferred the dissected tissue into the bottle, a drop fell from the lump of fat onto the stainless steel tray of the isolation cabinet. She wiped it away instantly before it had time to spread any infection, but even in those seconds, through the air curtain there was a smell of grease, soon obliterated by the disorienting edge of the alcohol she used for cleaning. She breathed it in and revelled in its contribution to the air of unreality. The enclosed space created an illusion of the culture hood as a toy theatre with its brightly-lit stage and its safety curtain. Cellular dramas, miniatures of survival, were played out there as she worked.

The half gram of tissue was invaluable to Rhea. With a visionary's clarity, she saw through it to the assortment of cells caught inside: the bountiful-bellied mature fat cells, the tough, scrawny fibroblasts and the most desirable and undistinguished of all, the stem cells. Still pluripotent, they were capable of being moulded into whatever was needed. All over their outer walls were surface markers, small molecular clusters that identified them to the other cells, moved information in and out of them. Identify those markers and you would have a means of separating out the stem cells, even the few that would be left in adult tissue. The scientific world yearned for a source of adult stem cells. Weary of being vilified for the use of embryonic tissue, it longed for redemption. There wasn't a single researcher who didn't want to be acclaimed as the blameless saviour of human health. Every one of Rhea's colleagues was engaged in a frantic contest for that Holy Grail.

The thought of her colleagues made Rhea pause. It was getting late; they'd be in the pub by now, but in the morning they'd all be in the lab early, processing the cells she

was preparing. Most of them had been taught by her - she was expert at the separation of the various cell types. She used minimal concentrations of the enzymes that broke down connective tissue and released the cells - the cell surface markers suffered little damage from the process. Filtering them through the net curtain fabric that she'd bought in a department store sale, she separated them, at blood temperature to keep them alive. When most workers couldn't force their will on their cultures, Rhea could persuade hers. They flourished under her care: complete genetic blueprints of the donor in every flask.

She worked steadily, quietly, cut off in the ever-decreasing series of containment rooms that were like nested boxes, except that the surprise was a human being at the centre: a person who liked the interludes that she spent there because being alone meant being without the incessant demands of the junior researchers, so that she could give all her attention to what she was doing.

Rhea didn't hear, or see anything: the fans were noisy; the brightest light came from the lamps in the hood; no sound or shadow alerted her. But an overwhelming sense of presence made her look up toward the observation window in the door. Lewis was pressed up against the glass, his forehead flattened. Even he wouldn't come in, risk contaminating her work. His mouth made a moue. Through the wire-laced glass, it looked like a kiss, but Rhea knew it wasn't.

"Amber," he was mouthing. Rhea smiled briefly and complicity, with a flush of pleasure; they understood one another, she and Lewis, because they were the same: uncomplicated, with none of the unsettling attraction of opposites that existed between him and Amber. Or her and Dave: tense, impatient Dave. At least he understood about work. Lew wasn't so lucky: his wife wouldn't be kept waiting. Lewis and Amber had married within a year of meeting and ever since then, the irresistible lure of her sister and the interminable demands of work had held him in joint thrall. Rhea had booked a slot for a set of radioactive samples to be analysed in the isotope suite. These results could be important, but if Amber wanted him at home, he would have to leave. The stress of not knowing the outcome was going to keep him on edge all evening.

"I'll phone." The smallest of nods was enough to create total understanding between the two of them. It was easy enough to keep up the constant exchange of research results: they were never further apart than a call or a text.

Rhea had stored hundreds of vials. She had labelled the cell surface markers with radioactivity, each one in quintuplet. Months of work were crushed into a few microlitres of sample. *Let them be stem cells*, she thought, as she picked them up.

The isotope suite was at the top of the building, up an enclosed, windowless set of stairs. Out were the pastel, colour-coded tiles of the lower floors, with their busy corridors, and in were bare concrete treads for the occasional user. In all that emptiness, the only thing that Rhea could hear was the echo of her own footsteps; she might have been the only person left in the building. She'd have liked someone to be there if the results were good: someone who'd be pleased for her. It was one thing, to enjoy the isolation in the tissue culture suite, with a dozen friends on the other side of the door. It was another, to spend your evenings somewhere that felt like solitary confinement.

The door to the isotope suite was painted a heavy-duty blue that jarred ambitiously with the waspish yellow and black of the *Danger Radioactive* warning symbol. The click of the lock release as she swiped her key card wasn't enough to open a heavy lead-lined door like this; Rhea knew just how to lean her shoulder against it so that she could sidle in through the space that her weight opened up. As soon as she was inside, the door swung shut. Its dull thud was the last sound that could be heard from the stair well. From the inside of that door everything - noise, radioactivity, waste, the air you breathed - was whisked away and cleansed before it could impinge on the uncontaminated world outside.

The scintillation counters were all busily moving vials of samples in and out of their chambers. At each ejection they whispered amiably into their computer links, delivering numbers to data files and persuading Rhea that there must be someone else in the room. It's the ghost in the machine, she joked, whenever the feeling threatened to overwhelm her. The incessant activity of the equipment used up the hemmed-in air and made it hot. It rolled down her throat heavily, inducing a distaste, like nausea: the nausea of being tired and invigorated at the same time. But the feeling wasn't unpleasant. It reminded her of something else dislocating: the end of a party, when the effects of the drink were just beginning to wear off but you weren't finished with having a good time.

Yawning, she checked the racks queued up on the conveyor. Her own vials were at the end of a long line already set up for overnight processing. There was no chance that

she would have her results before morning. The samples in front of hers belonged to Stephen Glatton. He'll be at home, labouring over his Sudoku by now, she thought, marking the numbers in soft pencil so that he can rub out the mistakes. That way, when it's finished, it'll look perfect. By the time he brings it into work tomorrow, he'll have convinced himself that he solved it without any of the usual wrong turnings and dead ends. She lifted his samples off and substituted her own. A few key strokes changed the machine settings from his to hers. By the morning, I'll have my counts and I'll have put his samples back. He'll never know.

The first of her samples nudged its way forward and dropped into the counting chamber. Usually, she would have gone back to the lab now, left the counter to go about its business, but she was nervous with excitement. That orderly progression of her racks along the conveyor belt was going to be reduced to a string of numbers. Her eyes snatched the first result from the screen. It didn't mean anything in itself, but she tried to read something into it: just to get an inkling of what the rest would be like. But it was impossible; she knew that she would have to wait for the full set. Only then would she see them as a whole and feel the pull of the trend, like an undertow beneath the surface of the sea; the one you feel just before the tide turns, just before the suck of change releases the waves again.

Let them be stem cells, she wished again, but the words disappeared blankly into the space between the reinforced walls and so she closed her eyes and let the rhythmic flurry of the machinery anchor her.

When the results eventually appeared they weren't at all the ones she had hoped for. She took the readout downstairs and sat at her desk, easing through the figures as though her eyes could massage them into something more compliant. The hint that she dropped to Lewis, that there might be something to tell him, twanged back at her, short of its mark. None of her samples proved homogeneous. Yet some were tantalizingly close. Every one of her vials showed promise, enrichment, but there weren't any pure preparations. A cataclysmic failure might have been easier to face. You could always make a drama out of a disaster but all she could see here were tedious months of repeating the same process, a dreary edging nearer to the goal.

Never as good as she hoped, yet never as bad as she feared, her figures stayed solidly insufficient, refusing to budge over fifty five percent. A pointless irritation at their stubbornness pricked at her. She wasn't going to be able to sleep tonight. It was dark outside, but only with the provisional city sort of dark that never really thickens into blackness. At least there was something consoling in that: the way that urban energy never surrendered to nature, something that told you not to give up. If she phoned Lewis at home now he was going to be disappointed and he would have to hide it. He'd pass her over to Amber. She wasn't up for a sisterly chat with an Amber cosy by the fire in her new house in the country, the darkness so black around her that her lighted windows could be seen for miles around.

The adrenalin of exhaustion was making a racket in Rhea's head, drowning out her optimism. She decided to change into her trainers and sprint home, a half-lit couple of miles along the towpath, and let the running sweat it all out of her. Running always unleashed her: even thinking about the steady rhythm of her legs, the glint of the recycled glass, like sparks under her feet, all along the towpath that led back to her flat was exhilarating. It made her feel elated and powerful; in fact, the hours that she spent running were the only ones when Rhea felt she unconditionally inhabited her own body.

*

There it was. Seeping through the crack in the doorway, there was that laboratory stench, the constant perfusion of chemicals. It sank into everyone who worked there, marking them out. They couldn't even smell it themselves but it bound them together, like this business of being attracted to someone whose immune system smelled the same as your own. Or was it the opposite? Amber couldn't remember, off hand. She leaned her face closer to the window panel in the door, careful not to actually touch it in case the smell attached itself to her. There was no sign of her sister. No doubt Rhea would know the answer, just like that. She would know exactly what could exert that unconscious draw on you: the comfort of the familiar or the fascination of the unknown.

Lewis often came home full of the lab, only thinking about work, only talking about work, smelling like that. She filled up the house with her own defenses - perfumed oils lay in wait for him - but still the smell crept in, blotting out her own ambience. She made him shower and change his clothes, but even then it leached out of his skin in bed,

and hung about, lying between them. Sometimes Amber even thought that was why she couldn't get pregnant; that smell got in the way somehow.

The researchers scarcely glanced up from what they were doing; moving quickly from one workstation to another; slotting things in; pressing buttons. Often, she saw them joking and fooling about while they worked. Their energy flashed like intersecting laser beams. But that was when Lewis was there; he was the force field they lined up around. It was the focus of his attention that held them so close, heads together, their eyes trapped by whatever he was looking at. Today, they were all self-engrossed and sober. No-one was going to notice her and let her in. She checked around for Rhea again. Still no sign. Her bench was empty, her pipettes all lined up neatly along the shelves; the whole of her space defined by her absence.

If I've got to hang about, I could at least do with some coffee, Amber thought, but there was a notice on the door, 'No Eating, No Drinking'. No entry either, by the look of it. She gave the door a belligerent shove, but it didn't move; she hadn't even rattled the electronic entry system. The steel finger plate threw her reflection back at her, staring her down. She was definitely locked out. No one looked; she had no idea how she would get in. But she wasn't putting up with the indignity of having to stand and knock outside her own husband's laboratory door.

The student who turned up was thin and her skin was patchy with dehydration. She was carrying a large bottle of something dark and dangerous looking, heavy too, which leaned securely against her skinny, little hip as she swiped her key card. Instantly the door opened and Amber was able to slip-stream through behind her.

Once inside, it was like being sized up by a band of the undead. The researchers had been holed up in the laboratory day and night for months and now that the autumn was here, they wouldn't see much sun until next year. They were pupa-pale and miserable from the long, hot summer's incarceration. Hungry holes of eyes took her in. She stared back. They wore trainers, jeans and t-shirts and, thrown over them, the anonymous white lab coats that drained the colour from their faces. She looked down at her own body, her dress: the red linen shifted and curled with the movement of her breath as though it had a life of its own. She knew what they were staring at. Next to them, she probably seemed to be on fire.

“I’ll wait for Lewis in here, if that’s all right. No point in sitting on my own.”

There was a shuffle of half-movement, a turning aside and then a swivelling back again of bodies, half drawn, half confused, by the unspoken invitation to keep her company. But Amber understood instantly.

“Don’t let me stop you if you’re busy, I’ll just sit here and watch.”

The lads retrenched to the safety of their benches but their attention kept detaching itself and wandering back to her. Amber took care to smile at them, each in turn, as though he was the only person in the room.

They were too scared to exist; that was their problem. They’d never had to face the real world, forced to adopt the sort of front that would keep paying clients trooping through the door of a public relations company. She could do that. She could haul tired businesses out of the doldrums, make their shabby images shiny again, but it wasn’t easy. Scientists had no idea what it took to be a flattering mirror for clients to admire themselves in. You gave such a lot of yourself away, in exchange for the PR industry’s legendary salaries.

Katherine coaxed a small plastic plate into the autoanalyser and tapped in her code. The ominous equipment responded to her fingers willingly; how confident she was of commanding the ghastly thing. Katherine sat next to it comfortably while her samples slid forward and the machine dispensed slugs of chemicals into each one. Amber perched on a stool as if she was in a cocktail bar while she studied the greedy sipping of the probes, the disdainful spit of their contents into the tubes.

“I wouldn’t dare touch something like that,” she said. “What does it do?”

Katherine did exactly as Amber expected: acted like a younger version of Rhea.

“It’s amazing,” she said. “You needn’t be scared of it at all.”

She patted the machine affectionately, as though it were a friend, saying “You check everything we do, don’t you?” She turned back to Amber. “It knows if you’ve made a mistake and tells you.”

Looked at from the inside like this, the laboratory didn’t seem so threatening, not with the competent enthusiasm of Katherine beside her. All over the lab, there were people cosying up to equipment that did just what they wanted. A row of pipettes, colour

coded for size, hung in front of Amber. It seemed only fair to them all that she should try one. Just with water, Katherine encouraged her: nothing to be frightened of there.

“First, you have to fit the tip to the shank, without touching it,” she said and Amber soon had everyone laughing at her incompetent antics as she struggled to fit the disposable tips. She was standing, the pipette poised in front of her, ready for another stab when the door opened again. The man who had come in - he must have had a key card - didn’t seem welcome. She felt the entire group stiffen as they saw him.

“Who’s that?” she whispered to Katherine.

“You don’t want to know.”

Everyone gathered together around the autoanalyser and there were a few moments of silence as the intruder stormed down the lab towards them: a few moments when Amber saw Katherine, Fazil, Andrew and Joe all glance towards Lewis’s empty office and then Rhea’s abandoned desk, looking for protection. The old feeling of being an incompetent in their world came crawling back. She’d probably got them into some kind of trouble, fooling around like that. The man had tufty, scrappy hair, pale, insignificant eyelashes and, even before he spoke, his mouth began to dip like someone who had stood on his dignity once too often. But he belonged: everyone there knew him. Lewis’s team closed together in dislike. Amber was sure this was some old battle, fought over and over again.

“What’s his name, Katherine?”

“Stephen Glatton.”

Stephen Glatton was seriously pissed off; he was shouting the odds all down the lab.

“Totally unacceptable,” he ended.

Before that he’d said other things: *Interference with order of counting, changed entries in the booking file*, but *totally unacceptable* was part of the everyday currency of a PR company. Amber was safely on home ground. Once he had said that, Stephen Glatton had changed himself from a threat into an opportunity. He was shouting at Lewis’s research group, but she didn’t suppose he would be quite so happy to take on the boss. He threw a booking list onto Rhea’s empty desk. His face was mottled with frustration; the

colour gave him a skittish nervousness, as though he was handling some unstable compound.

Skulking behind the benches, the researchers separated into two cohorts. The old hands pretended to search through their bottles and settled in to enjoy the confrontation; the inexperienced new kids shifted uneasily, embarrassed, but they couldn't pretend not to look. All of them held their breath. In the silence that stretched through the laboratory, a magnetic stirrer bar slipped out of control and clattered against the side of a beaker as though it had caught the tautness of the air. Katherine, Andrew and Joe leapt to turn it off and the frantic whirl of activity provided cover for Glatton to dump a rack of vials on Rhea's bench.

"These samples have been left blocking up the counter all bloody night. I've had to take the whole lot off myself."

His pompous voice reverberated from the bare surfaces of the laboratory, hunting down the incompetent and the careless. It looked as if Rhea was in the frame. Not one of the students spoke a word; their muted faces showed a customary resignation. The equipment chuntered on, oblivious to the change in atmosphere. But Amber had mastered the pipetting and she wasn't having Rhea attacked: not here, not in her husband's lab, where she had just burned off the damp gloom of scientific angst.

She stood forward to defend everyone against the threat of its return; she reckoned she was safe behind the cling of her dress, her lippy, the intriguing smear of dark vulnerability that she smudged under her eyes every morning. And he knew it too; she sensed the wariness of his recoil from her. Now he wasn't on his own ground; she had him bang in the middle of hers. She stepped towards him again, threatening his position.

"This is a white coat area for all staff," he said eyeing the door, siphoning off whatever doubtful authority he could from the safety notice.

"I don't need one, not for my job." Amber smoothed the red of her dress, ran her hands down her thighs.

"Really? I'd be interested to know what it is that you do around here, that doesn't require protective clothing."

Worse than his words was the flit of victory that rushed through his boring features: the undisguised congratulation of his own hegemony. Amber gave him her most innocent and disarming smile as she thought, thank you God, you have delivered the bastard into my hands. Then she shook him off with the most inconsequential shrug of her shoulders.

“Actually,” she answered, “I sleep with the boss. What were you planning to do to improve your career prospects?”

*

They were still lauding her performance when Lewis and Rhea showed up. And the most amazing thing had been Stephen’s reply. He hadn’t taken offence. *I’m probably going to be very nice to you*, he had said and flushed and half-grinned so she’d been taken aback and let him off the hook. It was as though he had a reversible personality and she had found the trick of turning him inside out. Astonishment and laughter rippled around her.

“But will he be very nice to the rest of us?” Rhea wondered.

“Only if she’s here to frighten him,” Katherine answered and Amber swirled with yet more pleasure.

She glanced back at the Biological Sciences Building as she wandered out with Rhea and Lewis into the low, evening sun. Stephen Glatton was up there somewhere, watching them leave for their Friday night drink. From the look of him, she didn’t think he had many friends. He’d watch the way they walked together, protected by family ties, and envy them. But that might mean that he’d want to join them and she didn’t want him elbowing his way into their gang. The windows were in shadow; blank, they gave no clue. He’d been made to recognize the value of what she had, Amber was sure of that.

She shrugged at Lewis and Rhea, letting them know what she had done for them; she had more than enough go in her for all of them.

“It’s the red dress.” She explained it away as though it was nothing to her. “Hot colours are full of energy.” But Lewis had to have the last word.

“Strictly speaking,” he said, “that’s not true. It’s the cold looking blue light that has the most energy.”

Even on Friday night, Lewis couldn’t stop lecturing.

“Get over yourself,” she told him. She pulled an annoyed face at Rhea but only got back a half-shrug of sympathy, behind the scientific orthodoxy of Lewis’s back.

*

Outside the bar, Rhea watched Amber sit down in the sun face on, angle her legs so they could benefit from the full glare and then close her eyes as though the whole business of colour and light might be too much to bear. Rhea had the horizontal evening rays on one side of her face so she shifted her chair and straightened her white legs next to her sister’s brown ones. Amber had this womanly maturity. Her body curved. Somehow it was never ashamed of its surfeit of ...everything. The look-at-me clothes, hair that was curled and bleached. Amber made freckles sexy. Rhea’s pale skinniness, her dark hair and oval face felt eclipsed by her sister’s brilliance. Side by side, subtle understatement couldn’t compete with exuberance.

She watched Lewis negotiate the paving dividing the bar from the canal side with three drinks balanced in his two hands. They said you loved someone who resembled your family and Amber loved Lewis. He was moving carefully because every few steps he had to flick his head to shift the lank, black hair out of his eyes. The awkward movement made the drinks spill and splash his trousers so they flapped then stuck against his thin legs. He didn’t give the slightest sign of noticing. His white skin burned in minutes.

“You girls bask in the sun,” he said, “and I’ll just sit here and bask in the reflected glory.”

“Strictly speaking, you’ll probably find it too hot to bear.” Amber hadn’t forgiven Lewis yet for correcting her about the blue light and he had to act chastened and take her hand, wrapping her fingers around the red of her cranberry juice, smoothing them into place until she relented and grasped the glass herself.

While they made their peace, Rhea checked her phone. There were no messages yet so she laid it down, open and ready. The wooden bar tables had an antiquated, academic patina that reminded her of libraries. They were supposed to have been worn by the elbows of dispossessed Non-conformists back in the seventeenth century. Whole families had set off from this place for the New World. But by the end of the twentieth century the City Fathers had been seduced away from their Puritanism by the rewards of

the post-industrial economy; they'd cheerfully sanctioned the regeneration of the whole historic canal-side into a glorious playtime venue. The same post-industrial fervour had infected the University where Lewis and Rhea worked, and the knowledge economy had become the new religion, a fast track to grace. Americans, prominent scientists, were discouraged by the US legal system from pursuing embryonic stem cell research and now they were coming back across the Atlantic, looking out contacts like her and Lewis.

"Late morning in California," said Rhea checking her watch. "The surf'll be up." They all stared at her phone, willing it to ring and when an accidental bump from a passerby made it tremble, it seemed as though it was working itself up to take this momentous call. Rhea trembled with it. She was the only one of them who had been to the States. She could think her way back across the Atlantic and right on to the West Coast where she had spent a couple of exhilarating years working in Vic's lab. She closed her eyes and escaped the sun. You couldn't shut out the brightness in California. It squirmed through your skin right to your bones.

The tremble now was for the memory of that excitement. There had been such an exuberance about everything they did: work, morning runs along the beach, work, surfing, more work, dinner in Oceanside restaurants, late-night work; she'd never been tired then. Money and energy knew no limits in the Californian sunshine. Even limits knew no limits; she'd had a lab of her own. Not like in Britain, where she'd done her PhD in the rain and on a tiny research grant, even though Lewis had done his best for her, ring fencing his money and his time to give her what he could. She squinted to look at him.

He smiled and raised his eyebrows. Now, the question was, what could she do for Lewis? She persuaded herself that the warmth on her legs was Californian heat and felt excitement rise through her. Lew had been electrified when she came back, bringing her commercial experience with her. And now Vic had been in touch. Could he talk to her about a link-up? The quivering of the phone, the way it surged up in anticipation of the US connection, made her heart bump up against her ribs. The new techniques she'd learned in the States tingled at her finger-tips. This could be an important chance for her, bringing home this contact.

From his place in the shade, Lewis was watching her. She might be his second-in-command but she had outstripped him with her commercial edge. If she could fix the

money there would be no stopping the two of them. He knew it too. He pulled her phone towards himself, into the pool of shadow made by the umbrella. When the phone finally did ring he looked at her, calculating and warning.

There were things that Rhea wasn't allowed to say. Technicalities mostly: the details of how her work was done; her methods of preparation; the formulation of the various growth media that she had discovered to support cellular de-differentiation; the antibodies that identified cell surface markers. Desperate secrets, all of them.

But Vic was after every last morsel of information. At the other end of the phone the beguiling trans-Atlantic tones poured on, swathing her in blandishments. The satinsheen of the flattery didn't fool her, but still it had its effect. There was a seduction in the balm of praise that she hadn't had enough of. It loosened her joints, the small muscles around her lips, but not her tongue. Her experiments were almost there, but that wasn't the same as the full-on there. Rhea was too wary to give anything away; she had long lost the knack of idle abandon. The full stop click of her closing mobile brought Lewis' eyes back to her. At least he had been polite enough to look away while she talked, pretended that he wasn't monitoring every word she uttered.

"Vic," she said. "He wants to come over to the conference a few days early, to have a word." Lewis pulled a face, not managing to disguise his triumph with doubt.

"He knows we're on to something, then."

"He wants in."

"Because we're only working with adult tissue?"

Rhea nodded and leaned towards Amber to disturb a spiderling from her sister's arm; she could feel the warmth of living skin: everything about Amber was so near to the surface.

"You're going to come into money, Amber."

The spider spun its long escape route over the edge of the table, launching off into the unknown.

"Don't you tell him anything else," said Lewis. "Better if you don't talk to him at all. Next time, get him to contact me." Rhea gave him a sharp look.

"I can handle him." But Lewis stood his ground. "He knows you, so he thinks he can manipulate you."

Rhea raised her eyebrows pointedly at her sister.

“Your husband thinks I can be manipulated,” she said, but Lewis was adamant, stiff with anxiety.

“I can’t afford any mistakes. You used to work for him. He’ll think you owe him.”

Owe him what, Lewis? I work for you. Am I supposed to owe you something, she thought, but she only smiled at Amber and shrugged, looking away. Lewis risked the sun and put one arm around each of them and drew them in.

It was a warm evening, the last weekend before the beginning of the term, and the great chestnut trees that led along the canal from the campus all the way to the quayside still held onto their leaves. In the winter when they were bare, they defied their fate, thrusting pollarded limbs, naked and bulbous, up towards the sky, but for now they were clothed, decent and courteous, in keeping with the civic order around them. The light was just beginning to fail. Returning students renewed their links, walking along the paved towpath touching with a languorous contentment. A solemn pair of lovers in matched jeans and leather jackets, leaned over the industrial railings of the footbridge, reunited in their reflections, dropping votive pennies into the limpid water to disrupt the images and holding one another close to watch them reform. As it grew too dark to see, they wandered on, towards the lights of the city, or home, to quiet and each other.

Rhea couldn’t guess which. She was relieved that her ideas had worked out, too relieved to bother arguing with Lewis. Dave was coming home tonight after a couple of days in Nottingham, giving a seminar. She wanted these soft edges, this feeling of being in between, the melting of day into night, because she could feel the beginning of something momentous.

Chapter 2

The story of Amber's face-off with Glatton resounded through the department, wakening up the listless moments between experiments. Everyone was talking about her. Amber could have used the admiration because she had work projects of her own that weren't going well, but she stayed away from the university.

In the evening, heading for home, was when she was happiest. Birds flocked to their roosts, forming black nets across the sky to gather up stragglers; commuters drove home, using the journey to create a clear space between them and their jobs. Amber glanced in the rear-view mirror, back towards the city. She thought of the crush in Oswald Street: the gathering of footloose friends, crowded into bars; the pushed bodies, pretended intimacies; the cringe-making competition for the most triumphant day. Then later, when you'd left and the drinks flushed them from their hiding holes, the tawdry speculations about your private life would come spinning out like sugar, brittle and sticky, lingering to be used against you some day. Embarrassment at the shallowness of it all grasped her. She sloughed it off and turned into the slip road. A weekend always seemed an eternity on Friday night.

The motorway receded. In front of her, dotted across the countryside, welcoming lamps were switched on in windows. This is my world now, she thought; I belong here and it can be whatever I make of it.

There was a cyclist riding one of those work-a-day bikes that old men rode slowly, pedalling their way to and from home. So much more dignified than the pumping lycra-clad buttocks you struggled to avoid in town. He was cresting a small hill, perhaps a hundred yards away. The road was empty so Amber tweaked the accelerator. The car speeded up, the move through the automatic gears as smooth as precision engineering could make it. A slight turn on the wheel and it swung out obediently, just the right amount to avoid any on-coming traffic. She overtook the old man and moved back into place. It was getting cold. She stretched for the climate control button; she would need it away from the artificial city ambience. Everything behind in order, a quick check, a glance in the mirror. Oh God, she couldn't see the cyclist at all.

Failing light. Vague, gloomy shapes. A spasm that closed up her throat and clumsy, shaking legs as she tried running back along the road. The bike was stretched out on the verge, its front lamp shining up into the sky. The old man: nowhere.

Ambulances would come screaming; they would take a long time out here. Then they would take him off, speeding away to the hospital, or would there be no hurry, to the morgue. *Oh God, I was really careful*, she'd say to the policeman. *I was watching him*. And his face would take on the disengaged, accusatory expression that he used whenever he had to deal with protesting suspects, as legions of lawyers filed to take their places behind him.

"Christ, where are you?" she croaked. Across the hedge, staring at her in his own paroxysm of alarm, was the old man, one hand clutching at the trailing greenery.

"You alright, pet?" he asked her, warily. Amber's knees buckled haphazardly, with no particular connection to her legs.

"I thought you were hurt," she said. The old man grinned, the last of the light catching his long teeth. "It's very kind of you to be concerned," he said. "But I just stopped to pick some blackberries for my missus. She likes them, see, and there won't be many more now."

He must have heard the shudder of relief that rattled her bones. Grateful for the falling dark, Amber hoped he hadn't actually noticed anything strange. The car door was standing wide open into the narrow road; she hurried back and slid inside, closing it before anyone could come along and tear it off.

It was Grandad's death that had given her the money to move out here to concentrate on getting pregnant. She dreaded the thought that she had constructed a terrible bargain: a life in exchange for a death. Fate would want paying for something like that. She felt the hard pinch of anxiety that always came along with getting what you wanted.

Snitter Heugh was everything she wanted, the perfect place to bring up children. Early Saturday morning, it was hardly light and Amber was outside, enthralled by it all. The garden had been neglected all summer. After Mr. Darell moved away, no one had cut back the spring bulbs or the perennial borders or pruned any of the hedges that broke the winter wind, so they had all grown unchecked. Such benign neglect, coming after years

of careful cultivation, meant that the autumn garden was in full fruit: the spiked holly that kept out the next-door cattle was splattered expectantly with red berries, arching their way towards Christmas; bulging seed cases yellowed, prescient of coming summers. Amber picked one and rubbed it between her fingers. It split open and scattered its seeds into the dark earth.

Lewis and Rhea were working - playing - she thought, day and night to get ready for their conference and this American, the money man. She had a few ideas of her own about how commercial involvement could be brought off. Amber knew something about money. It made the world go round, however Lewis and Rhea tried to deny it. In the end she would have to help them out with Vic, but today, she could lean against the brown stone wall and feel the heat that it was beginning to absorb from the sun. The stones were squarely cut, large for house walls. Everyone knew that they'd come from the Roman Villa, a couple of fields away. She could see the stunted remains, worn low by centuries of attrition; the sense of history intrigued her. She couldn't stop imagining the men who had hauled her stones, building something that had lasted nearly a thousand years. They must have walked on the very paths she used now, swearing and sweating.

"Sweating?" Rhea had said, slapping her down. "You haven't been up here in the winter yet. They were probably freezing most of the time." She had reluctantly agreed about the swearing. "Yes, you'll have got that bit right." Amber moved her shoulders against the roughness of the stones, trying to rub some of their strength into herself. Because persuading Lewis and Rhea to do the sensible thing about the conference wasn't going to be straightforward.

Up here at Snitter Heugh, morning came fully formed. Once the sun had tipped the hills there was nothing to hold it back. It flowed across the wide valley bottom unimpeded and filled every hollow and cranny: nothing like in the city, where gloom could linger most of the day in closed rooms and back alleys. The light was gaining strength, promising a fine, bright day, far too good to waste. I'll ask Rhea and Dave over, she decided. Once the house was full it would attract luck, more life. For now it was too big a space to fill up all by themselves, all by herself, really, because Lewis was still in bed, sleeping off the corrosive effects of too many hours in the lab.

She waited until nine o'clock to call; Rhea and Dave would be up, but not busy yet. They'd be at the table in Rhea's flat, weekend breakfast crumbling around them, both of them too distracted to talk. Talking would come later, when they had forgotten about the week's worries, or at least managed to clear them to one side. Sitting quietly on her kitchen step, holding her breath, Amber could hear the rasping of cow's tongues as they tore grass on the other side of the hedge. It didn't matter if you were too tired to talk as long as you had that to listen to. They could sit out before lunch and relax. Rhea would appreciate that sound.

Dave answered the phone.

"Good morning," she said, "I'm calling to let you know that you have been selected to receive a day out in the country. Lunch will be provided by the famous kitchens at Snitter Heugh and served *al fresco* by ...me." There was no sound from the other end of the phone. "It's a lovely day up here, Dave. You and Rhea can have a total chill out. I've already done the cooking." Amber paused, leaving space for an appreciative riposte, something funny and clever that would get the day off to the right start, but nothing came back. She gave the phone an irritated little shake. "Dave, are you still there?" she said into the void of the dead line.

She had to dial Rhea's mobile to get an answer.

"What's the matter with your phone" she asked. Rhea's voice was blurry; she sounded half awake when she said that nothing as far as she knew was the matter and Amber realised that she was still in bed. "Why aren't you up, Rhe?"

"I'm just having a lie in, that's all."

Amber knew that Rhea wasn't just having a lie in. Lewis might like to stay in bed but not Rhea. She got out of bed as soon as her eyes opened and made herself something to eat. Rhea was always too hungry to stay asleep.

"Why? Are you ill? I wanted you to come over for the day. It's such nice weather, we shouldn't waste it really."

Rhea sighed and said, "I'm all right but I don't think we can make it, Amber." Her voice was untypically sour.

“It’ll do you good.” But Rhea wasn’t having any. “I’m alright, Amber,” she protested. “I went back to work after you left last night. It was really late so I slept in the spare room, that’s all. I haven’t woken up yet. Don’t worry about it.”

Chinese lanterns caught the morning sun with a throb of orange. Amber couldn’t let go of the idea of Rhea and Dave made happy in her home: a fragile vision that they weren’t signing up to.

“I wanted to talk to you about the conference.”

“We can’t come over Amber, but I’m fine. You come down here, if you like. I’ll meet you for coffee in town. Come on the train. Lewis can drop you at the halt and we can meet at the station coffee shop.”

Rhea’s voice on the end of the phone had turned steely with resolve; Amber accepted that there wasn’t going to be a celebratory summer day at Snitter Heugh: that a glorious something was already over and done with. Telling Lewis that she wanted a lift, Amber, appealed to him.

“What do you think is wrong with them?”

Lewis shrugged, car keys ready, jangling at the ends of his fingertips.

“No idea. Girl stuff, I expect. Probably wants you to go on the train so you can have a boozy lunch together.”

Apart from that, Lewis was puzzled, at a loss. Or more likely, she thought, not bothered. She could already read, in the dart of his eyes towards the study, his eagerness for the hours he would have to himself. He was more at home with research than people. But she wanted company. The sisters had always been close; with their mother, they had formed a tight little knot against the world after Dad died and it had never really unravelled.

She already had an inkling of why Rhea wouldn’t come to Snitter Heugh. The scenario spread itself out to her: that her sister was pregnant. That was the only picture that all the pieces fitted.

Rhea was sick in the morning; Dave was worried to death. And on top of that, Rhea still had to protect her. She didn’t want her to drive because she knew the crippling pain that her unwelcome pregnancy was going to cause.

The hurt deep inside Amber drew further back and hid itself, unable to acknowledge such a debt.

She was overcome by the effort that this was going to cost her, to be pleased for Rhea, who wouldn't be pleased for herself, and at the same time, to hide her own grief. Her body felt outside her control; it wouldn't co-operate. Rhea had been right about the train, she wasn't fit to drive.

Years of suppressing anguish rolled out before Amber. She saw herself suffocating in the background of Rhea's motherhood: at christenings and birthday parties, during holidays and school concerts, she would always be a ghost at the family banquet. She was doomed to frighten people by trying to join the feast. She put on her jacket, as though she had never done it before. Fingers, elbows, shoulders; joint by joint she worked herself into the sleeves. She paired the buttons charily with their buttonholes. This was how it would be from now on.

Sitting on an empty train, Amber watched the countryside disappear and change into suburban houses. Weekend families were at home, pottering in the garden, cutting lawns and cleaning cars because this was an ordinary Saturday for them. If those people were to go out, their houses would wait patiently for them; plates would stay put in the kitchen cupboards, clothes in the wardrobes or airing on the radiators, even the food in supermarket storage jars would remain the same, just as it had been left. But while she was away from it, her own home, the focus of her hopes - she couldn't not know that now - was going to change irrevocably. All the things she'd optimistically assembled would transform themselves into jeering changelings. By the time she got back to Snitter Heugh, Rhea would have told her and everything would be different.

As soon as she saw Rhea, she knew she was right. The black leather coat that had fitted loosely was strained across the last button. The pale face, the tired eyes, her dark hair hanging limp and despondent, all helped to drive the truth home. It was like being in school again with some new teacher standing you up in front of the whole class and asking if you were going to be as clever as your sister. Amber had understood then that her best chance had lain in being a good girl; she understood now that she was going to need everything she could muster even to be able to put on the pretence of being good.

She rehearsed her public relations face, empathetic, understanding in a distant, professional sense, as she crossed the station forecourt, but Rhea turned, the coffee machine spitting steam and fury behind her, and waved so wanly, but with such a brave

effort that Amber's resolve fled. A harassed barista saw the change and looked back uncomfortably to his fuming machine. The first of all the embarrassing and humiliating incidents in store for Amber had already happened; she cringed in shame.

"Whatever's the matter?"

"Nothing, what's the matter with you?"

Rhea and Amber swapped concerned looks to and fro across the tiny table, a silent, sisterly, auction for jurisdiction. It was Amber, as usual, who gave in and spoke first.

"Why couldn't you come to Snitter Heugh? It's a lovely day."

She looked up at the station roof where a few broken tiles were leaking a jaundiced sunlight into the concourse. "It would do you good to get some fresh air. You're so pale you must be" but she couldn't say the rest, so she stopped and waited, braced herself for the news.

"Dave. I didn't want to come with him."

So that was it. Dave didn't want the baby. Rhea and Dave were both far too career-oriented; a baby wasn't going to fit into their lives. Shining through Amber's mind came the glorious idea that she could take on the baby. The thought of nursing the lonely, little one glittered urgently, only to fade; the presence of Rhea prohibiting it. Amber tried to replace it with an image of herself smiling at Rhea's news, happy for her, but it wouldn't quite take shape. Her lips felt stiff and intractable, hardly able to let her articulate what had to be said.

"You know," she forced out as she reached across the table, "you can tell me, Rhea. I won't mind."

"You'll find out soon enough, anyway."

There were some things you couldn't hide. Amber's gaze strayed to the strained button. It was open now; Rhea's hand hung loosely across her abdomen. Amber was able to manage a consoling smile for a sister. But her heart was fluttering. She couldn't look at Rhea's face. She looked away for a moment so that she would only have to hear the news. Rhea was talking to her.

She was saying, *Dave and I are splitting up.*

The rest of the concourse was silent. The clamour of arrival and departure stopped. Amber had to blink her eyes to make sure it was still there and then, miraculously, it went on its way again.

“Why?”

It was an accusation. Amber flung it out into the void where it reverberated and came back at her. Rhea was silent and gathering the thin spills of sugar into a pattern, alternating the white and the brown colours in radiating spokes, with a hole in the centre.

It couldn't be endured, her sister's aversion to facing the truth. Amber brought the whole calamity down on herself.

“Just because you're pregnant?”

Rhea's face registered alarm, fear and then incredulity, each in turn.

“Amber,” she laughed, “Why would I be pregnant? You've got babies on the brain.” She piled the sugars back into the dish and rubbed her hands emphatically.

Amber was weak with the ineffable relief of a sacrifice reprieved; it meant that she was equal to whatever else was needed of her. She moved her chair, put a protecting arm around Rhea's shoulder, feeling her stiffening slightly at the close contact. Usually she hated it when Rhea brushed her off: this time she tried not to mind.

“Come on, what happened? You were fine last week. It can't be that bad.”

Rhea shrugged against her, impatient, discomfited, but Amber kept her arm firmly in place. “You've had a row,” she said. “It happens. It's nothing. You'll get over it.” She shrugged her shoulders to prove how unimportant this would turn out to be and Rhea escaped her arm this time.

When Amber discovered that Rhea was throwing Dave out because he had found himself another job, in Nottingham of all places, she couldn't stop laughing.

“Oh Rhea.” Tears hung behind her eyes; she smiled widely, just to make sure there could be no mistake as to the reason for them. “What's wrong with that? His contract's nearly up. Aren't you glad he's got a permanent job?” When Rhea took too long to answer, stirring at her coffee implacably, as though it was to blame, Amber's good nature filled in the silence for her. “You can commute at weekends, then when you've finished this project, you could look for something nearer to him.” The ominous cessation of the coffee stirring cautioned her. “If you wanted to, that is.”

Limpily, and too late, she sat quiet.

Rhea was already gathering her things and making to leave.

“He didn’t even bother to tell me,” she said. “The first I knew about it was last night, when it was all sorted. Everyone in the university must have known, except me. Who sat plotting with him and promised not to tell me? I’d like to know that.”

“I had no idea, Rhea, and neither did Lewis, or he would have told me.”

Amber pulled her sister back into the uncomfortable plastic seat. *Oh, can’t you see, she was going to say. I’ve seen it, Rhea. When you and Lewis were too full of yourselves to notice, Dave and I, we would exchange embarrassed smiles, waiting for it to be our turn. All he wanted was his turn.* But Rhea was piling cups and clearing away the debris, her eyes darkening and threatening.

“Rhea, you can’t trash your whole relationship over a job interview.”

Finally, Rhea sagged. Her face collapsed into deep, hurt lines.

“It’s not the bloody job interview. It’s that he didn’t even tell me. He’s made a fool of me.”

“There must be an explanation, sweetie. Why don’t you have a proper talk, just the two of you?” Rhea shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Amber wondered privately if Rhea had wanted her to come down to talk to Dave, to help patch things up.

“Why did you want me to come on the train?”

“Because you would have parked your car at the flat and I’ve told him he may as well go right now. I didn’t want you to run into him packing.”

“Come on, Rhea, you haven’t thrown him out already? You can’t just let that be it, after all this time.”

“That’s what he said,” snapped Rhea. “He said we could work something out. But, believe me, after what he’s done, I can end it just like that. I don’t need him, you know.”

That implacable tone: she knew it all right. It had cut Amber down all her life. When Rhea made up her mind she stuck to it, whatever it cost. No going back with her, no second chance to make amends. There was a long, quiet spell. Finally Amber reached across the table and put her hand onto her sister’s arm, but it was as if Rhea was enclosed

in a glass box, visible but untouchable. Who else would rather be alone than risk not being loved?

“He does love you, you know.”

Rhea raised her eyebrows. There might have been the splintery glint of hurt but Amber knew that the subject of Dave was now supposed to be closed between them.

She used the best china that evening, and a tablecloth that had come to light during the move, covered in butterflies and flowers tied with fancy ribbon bows. Whenever their mother had not wanted to talk, she'd embroidered things: butterflies, crinoline ladies. Easter flower extravaganzas had provided a bulwark against the constant attentions of their grandparents. After Dad's death, Mum had disappeared into needlework, to avoid giving offence. As time went on her bunker had developed into a haven and she'd become involved with Guilds. The old fashioned linens had turned into great mystically patterned hangings, exhibited in galleries and stately homes. The grandparents had thoroughly approved of this turn of events, involving, as it did, no new husband to usurp their son's place. They'd continued to pay his share of the firm's profits to his Stella. *Unstinting*, their mother had been heard to say in confidential undertones to her friends. Amber wondered these days, if her mother had minded the pressure to preserve her widowhood, that born-again virginity, and, the grandparents had subtly implied, her income, or had she truly found pleasure in the colour and texture of this absorbingly female art.

Amber herself had never sewed, hated it. At school she'd been forced to produce a row of rosebuds to decorate an unwanted bookmark. They'd felt like barbed wire to her as she stretched them out across the schoolroom aida. She blenched now, shamefaced about her hysteria with Rhea. She set the table with determined pulses of kindness: Lewis's knife - he liked the slim modernist cutlery; the electric salt grinder, a present from work colleagues; two glasses bought with Granny on a trip to Bath. She left the places for Rhea and Dave empty, waiting, promising herself to fill them soon.

*

Rhea knew that Amber was being typically thoughtful. She phoned every day and never mentioned Dave; she was being supremely tactful about that because she would be dying to get the full, unadulterated story. But Amber kept out of it. She chatted about

work, the flat, Stephen Glatton, her home improvements, but every one of these 'safe' topics transformed itself into a funny story with a sad hollow at its centre. Insufficient yields, empty spaces, that awful man, not enough money: all of them led to awkward silences that Amber stirred away with jokes. It was touching to be so carefully managed, but it was irritating too.

It must be tiredness that was causing it, because Rhea's mind had never been so badly-behaved. If she wasn't careful, she found herself going over and over it again: the way that Dave had got himself another job without telling her. There must be some people who'd known: his referees for a start. She stared uncontrollably at the Business School, wondering if they'd been sworn not to tell her, or if Dave had just trusted to luck that she wouldn't find out.

The routine of the laboratory kept her going. But away from the bench, she was at a loss as to how to pass time so she stayed at work, where the air-con hummed the room into cool and Rhea into calm. The idea of two outputs from the one system pleased her and she worked constantly, letting the circuitry take the strain. Forgetting herself and slowly improving her cell yields at the same time: how could that not be right? Leaving work as late as she could, Rhea went running in the evenings and counted every pace: the unbroken rhythm and steady accumulation of the numbers permeating her.

Afterwards she would duvet down, warm in the bed that she and Dave used to share, but still it took such an effort to sleep, such a long leap across humiliation and anger, that she gave up on nights, often abandoning the effort and leaving the blinds open to watch the sky. The days were cooler and more bearable now but it seemed the earth, fully charged by summer, had to rid itself of all the surplus heat. The nights were suffocating and she always felt queasy. If she did manage to dip into sleep, it brought no relief. She would wake up shortly afterwards, alarmed by the noisy grinding of her teeth. Her jaw ached and when the clocks went back in October, and her colleagues enjoyed an extra hour of sleep, Rhea endured it.

It could be tiredness that was making her feel cold all the time too.

"Rubbish," Amber said, "It is cold. Look at the weather. I need double glazing." Even while she watched the kitchen blinds move in the draught from Snitter Heugh's original feature-sash windows Rhea deciphered the message as *I need a baby*. Home

refurbishment as displacement activity was easy to understand. Rhea thought she herself had learned all there was to know about displacement activity in the last few weeks of trying not to think about being miserable: in fact, betrayal boredom was setting in. She climbed onto a chair and tightened the cord on the blinds to stop them flapping. Amber looked a little disconcerted at the makeshift solution. "You can always borrow a cardigan, Rhea. Any one you like."

In Amber's bedroom - it was Lewis's too of course, but he wasn't allowed quite the same ownership rights - there was a gloomy clothes press, bought at an auction. It could never have been made to hold a wardrobe like Amber's; the blues and the greens and the deep, startling pinks shimmered agonisingly inside it, where there should have been greys and browns and sombre, regal purples. Rhea grabbed a pashmina, turquoise and peach like tropical coral, and dislodged something under it. A lemony flutter to the floor: a soft threaded ribbon that she knew, puzzlingly, had to be a baby jacket. For a sudden moment Rhea thought, she's pregnant. A whole world of Amber fulfilled was hidden in a clothes press and she, her sister, had been deliberately excluded from it: a re-run of the Dave scenario.

Bitterness engulfed her, but even alone, she slapped the glaze of indifference over her face. Before she had got it securely in place, she knew that it couldn't be true. Amber wasn't pregnant. She had said so, and she could never lie about a thing like that. She must have bought the jacket as a talisman, imagining that baby arms would come along to fill those little sleeves.

Rhea could remember Amber as a girl, casting the I Ching for a fascinated crowd of school friends, getting them to throw pennies in the air, then writing down her mysterious runes with them hanging on her every word. She said the future was already out there and all you had to do was to reach forward and touch it. Her fingers - she was into Goth at the time and her fingers were tipped with great blobs of black varnish - were perfect for the job. Lewis, the house in the country, the baby clothes: they were all part of the same process. Rhea pushed the lemony froth back - burying it as deeply as she could - piling the pashmina on top and then she took a cardigan from another shelf.

The sisters slouched down together on the sofa. Rhea hated wearing someone else's clothes, especially Amber's. She hadn't put her arms into the cardigan sleeves so that it slipped from her shoulders and crumpled onto Amber, where it belonged.

"This cardigan looks better on you than on me. I may as well give it to you." Neither of them moved. At the edge of her vision was Amber's wanting face. Rhea knew what she would be thinking and couldn't mention.

"Why don't you do something about it?" Rhea asked. Amber's face sprang into life. "I am doing something," she said. "I'm always doing something about it. Poor Lewis is worn out." They both dissolved into laughter: the first laugh untinged by compassion that they had shared for weeks.

As Amber subsided into a comfortable humour, Rhea pressed her. "The tests won't hurt, you know, and they might uncover something really simple. You ought to find out," she went on, unable to disguise her belief in the value of a methodical, scientific approach. Amber was still reluctant.

"But what if they say no? There's no hope then, is there?"

False hope: it was a situation that Rhea never wanted to be in again. "At least you'll know the worst. What's to lose?" Amber didn't answer. "I had to face up to knowing...about Dave. It was not knowing that was worst."

"I'm just not sure, Rhea. You're better at knowing than me. Knowing is what you are really good at, actually." Amber's voice faltered with the certainty of unfulfilled need.

Rhea couldn't forget the hidden baby clothes and all they represented. Like in running, there were muscles you didn't know you had until they started hurting. It was the same with your feelings. Being left out, the last to know, went a long way beyond hurt pride; it burrowed down to something so far beneath, so well hidden that you didn't know it was there until it moved and ached.

"I'd give you a baby, if I could," Rhea answered. "Anyway, I bet medical science could. At least think about it, Amber."

They made some supper. The peppers blackened under the grill and the skin peeled away so that the pulp was cooked and held the goat's cheese firm until it melted. Amber's eyes searched Rhea's face trying to find an answer.

"Do you really think it would work?"

“Why wouldn’t it?” said Rhea. “I’ll talk to Eleanor Bonworth for you, babes.
She’s lovely. You won’t find anyone better.”

The knot between them tightened.

Chapter 3

Normally, when Lewis read, he drained the life out of the book. Not this time. *Investigations into Infertility: Part I (male)* had got the better of him. Its detailed descriptions of the infinitesimal malfunctions that compromise masculine fecundity had left him feeling perfectly limp. The authorities had installed CCTV cameras to deter student misbehaviour in the library, so he'd squeezed himself into a secluded corner of the stacks where there could be no extant record of his reading. Now he felt as though he were loitering in a doorway, wearing a dirty raincoat, and it didn't coincide with his preferred image: bright young academic, pushing for a chair and flaunting the sexiest wife in the University. In fact, it made him look like a no-mark wannabe.

This was something that happened to other people: the sort of people who didn't put the effort in. He'd always worked hard and he couldn't understand how he'd come to be here.

"Stamfordly!" his mates would shout, breath clouding in the freezing air of the school playing field, as they kicked the ball, expecting him to pick it up. Lewis had always thought there was a bit of class to his name. It was a place, like Stamfordly or Leicester, and Dukes were once addressed by their place name when the King called them to his side.

Now it was "Stamfordly!" some monstrous nurse was going to shout, expecting him to stand up in front of a waiting room full of people and go to submit his reproductive tract to intimate investigation. He squirmed, and the book fell to the floor. As he groped about under his seat, it hit him with the unwarranted weight of a foul blow, that when his tests were run, all the lab rats would know who he was.

"Stamfordly?" they were going to say, sleaze lifting their voices. "He works over the road, in stem cells, doesn't he?" Their grubby hands were going to pluck at the cover of his report form and work their way through the results. Sperm Count. At the thought, he let out a groan.

"The bastards!" And then he had to look up, nervously, sure that the cameras had heard him. Obviously, he couldn't use his own name. He needed an alter ego; the bloke

they knew at lab booze-ups couldn't be identified as the patient whose sperm they were peering at.

Long-haul Lewis, working all hours. Innocent enough words but they had sharp edges. When he had first been allocated an office, the only available space was a corner of the lab. The University maintenance men erected a couple of partitions - plywood and glass - but no-one had thought to order any blinds so every passing student could look over and watch Lewis at his desk. Grateful for any space of his own, he hadn't made a fuss. Instead, he'd stuck posters over the lower part of the windows and ducked down behind them. Even so, unpredictable transmissions penetrated his flimsy screen, clearer on some days than others. Sometimes, it was just by chance; he would get a helping of some student smartness that had never been meant for his ears. Sometimes, it was deliberate; he was meant to hear the whinges, the deviously-voiced complaints of his research team. He tried to take notice because he hadn't forgotten his own years as a post-doc, but it was impossible to know what to do for them. They were never satisfied. If he had more funding, more prestige, if only everything wasn't always just another few steps into the future. Lewis heard more grumbling through the lash-up of a partition than he liked.

Now, in the library with the incriminating volume balanced between the table and his knees, it was the unheard that was occupying him: Amber and Rhea, forever plotting together, shifting apart whenever he approached. He suspected that they had planned these infertility investigations and then laid a trail of goodies in his path, so that he had gobbled his way into these straits without a thought.

He'd come across Amber clearing out the bathroom cabinet, her bottles of flowery remedies piled into the bin.

"Rhea says alternative medicines don't work."

He'd walked straight into that trap.

"She's right. Homeopathy is rubbish, but if it helps you to believe it..."

He kissed her.

"I think you're right Lewis. We should do everything properly, scientifically. I think we should have infertility investigations."

At first Lewis agreed, wholeheartedly. “What a woman,” he’d said, “Sex and science.”

Only later had he realized that it meant him too. And later still, that Rhea had something to do with it.

He’d been sitting outside of theatre one evening, waiting for some tissue. He’d been working late, because of the offer of a biopsy sample, some bone cells from a hip replacement. The patient was a surgeon himself, getting on; it seemed that the older you were, the more convinced you became of the importance of bio-donations. This character actually rang the lab, looking for a chance of immortality, and offered them a bit of himself. He said he was having some cartilage for his own research and while they were sawing his bones up, he didn’t mind parting with a bit of his marrow. It wasn’t so often that they got the offer of something like that, just the stuff of stem cells, although the younger the donor, the better they liked it. This particular surgeon reckoned he had been rejuvenated by an affair with a research assistant - probably giving him the bone marrow of an embryo. Rhea had grimaced and said she’d look for the evidence in the cell cultures, not the bedroom. The guy had offered half a kilo of adipose tissue from his beer gut too, but that had to be declined. Rhea said she just couldn’t face it. On the way up to theatre to collect the sample, Lewis had pictured him, with his hammock of belly, in the blue patient’s nightshirt, asleep on his stainless steel bed and he knew why Rhea had been so reluctant.

The list was running late. It was half term and a thirteen year old had been messing about on the railway line and not got out of the way quickly enough when the Leeds train came through. One of the theatres, and several of the most experienced surgeons, had been taken by the emergency so Lewis was left waiting in the corridor. He thought he could smell the soporific of medication in the air. Only the night lights were on; they illuminated the linoleum flooring, making it gleam with a homely cleanness. In the dimmed light, the balm of the warm air, the sense of exclusion and postponement, he began to drift towards sleep.

The double doors banged apart and one of the trainees came stumbling out of theatre. He sat, hanging his hands between his knees, putting his head down.

“Tired?” Lewis asked him.

“Wiped out. We’re losing the kid, and it’s manic in there.” As he moved to sit up straighter, his operating clogs squeaked against the floor, a note of distress and alarm. “I felt faint. Nothing to eat all day.”

After Rhea had processed the sample, Lewis saw the young medic again, downstairs in reception, searching through his pockets for change for the tea machine. Still haggard, he greeted them both with a thin, discouraged smile that told them he had just seen his first death. He needed consolation, food, rest.

“I’ve got a cereal bar,” Lewis offered, holding it out. The lad reached to take it just as Lewis moved towards him. They collided, and fumbled together, and then laughed as they tried again to pass the cereal bar between them.

Just then the parents of the boy who had died came out of the chapel with the priest. Lewis didn’t think they’d seen anything - they were deep in the rawness of the loss; they had bowed heads and the priest was talking quietly into their ears - but a burst of mortification stopped his laughing and shuffling around.

The grieving parents stood close together. In a bolt of understanding Lewis realised that the boy would never really be gone from this world until the two people who still held the spark of his life were dead too. Those two people, between them, still contained every one of his genes. In a way, the most important thing for them now might be to stay close, to stay alive, so that their son would too.

The cereal bar was handed over, and they separated, too embarrassed to exchange more than a cursory goodbye. It was in the car park, into the tumble of his sense of shame and crassness that Rhea said, “I’ve had a word with the fertility consultant, Lewis. She’ll be glad to see you and Amber. She says you’re nowhere near to giving up hope,” and for the first time, Lewis recognised the unsoundable depth of Amber’s longing.

Still, he hadn’t appreciated all the indignities that it involved. He put *Infertility Investigations* back on the stack and slunk into the undergraduate lab. With his manhood at stake, Lewis had to know for himself. He had to conduct a private sperm count, in his own laboratory. Luckily, the students were somewhere else and he was able to put one of the counting chambers into his pocket without having to explain to anyone why he wanted it. The trouble was, his own laboratory was full of people who were constantly alert to one another. He didn’t even dare to put the counting chamber down in case

someone wanted to know what he was going to do, so he kept it in his pocket. He had to pretend to go home and then skulk back, late enough for the lab to be empty. Even so, he had his excuse ready: a forgotten paper that he needed, slipped between his filing cabinet and desk, where he usually kept his briefcase.

Lewis wished he could tell Amber. Whatever the embarrassment, a child was something he couldn't refuse her. There was a long pull, and it was a steady and a slow pull towards her, that sometimes he welcomed, and sometimes he had to resist, because, if he let it have his way, he might disappear into Amber. The space that was left, the space that should have been his, would be filled by Stephen, or Featly, or anybody, jeering at his loss of himself, even while they envied all that he had to gain. This test was a thing he would always have to keep to himself.

It only needed a drop from the tadpole jar of his semen on the slide. He bent his head to the eyepiece. It was Rhea's microscope, adjusted to suit her eyesight and Lewis could only just make out something buffeted about by Brownian motion, the random thrash of molecular energy.

He changed the focus to accommodate his own vision and something more purposeful came into view.

Another subtle adjustment to the resolution, the difference between yes and no, and there they were, everywhere. Beating a path across his view were sperm: determined, fierce and gloriously unrestrained Lewis-spermatozoa.

If there'd been the least possibility of celebrating a sperm-fest, Lewis would have seized it. He'd have cracked open champagne and invited friends, strangers in the street would have had glasses pressed into their hands, but actually, as he thought it through, there wasn't much chance of a party. He could hardly rush home and tell Amber what he'd done; he couldn't leave the results on Rhea's desk for her to find in the morning. The furtive, messy business of procuring the sample at work, and then checking it yourself could seem just a bit sordid, after the event.

Still, he had a result. He decided he ought to allow himself a drink on the way home, congratulate himself privately and get over it before he saw Amber. That way she would never know. His resolve stiffened all round; he would take the *Infertility Investigations part II* out of the library and make himself fully conversant with the

procedures, *female*, so that he could prepare Amber and at the same time, make sure that he couldn't be patronised by Rhea's friend, this fertility consultant.

When he reached the canal side bar, music was blaring from the doorway to attract the serious drinkers: students and the trainee lawyers from the city who had a lot to forget before they were ready for bed. Lewis wanted to remember. He wanted to fix this feeling of affirmation and preserve it for the rest of his life. He did feel that a man so unconditionally in charge of his own destiny couldn't reward himself with a drink in a student bar. An aura of entitlement persuaded him that something more sophisticated would also have a fitting sense of restraint. He drove on to the Ashfield.

In the space between the two bars, a mile of modern high rise development and safely out of the sight of the University buildings, Lewis enjoyed his great rolling swell of elation. He loosened his grip on the wheel and let his jaw unclamp. There was a surge of lust and he toyed with the idea of going straight home - the provoking allure of Amber's body was never going to shimmer with its tinge of anxiety again - but as he came close to the Ashfield, a dark Mercedes, blue merging into night, hurtled from the exit across his path. He had to brake sharply as it cornered wide, and at the last moment, he swung off the road and into the car park.

The bar at the Ashfield always had a muted look; the air was opaque with restraint, the furnishings subtle. Low candles glowed discreetly on the tables. Lewis asked for whisky and held the glass to a candle, watching the light reflect through the crystal and the liquid. It made an amber pool, shadowing across his hands. She would be waiting; she knew how to get everywhere, right under his skin, always just drawing back the right amount to make him move forward. He dared not disappoint her.

A tight group of men emerged from the dining room, circling the fireplace then heading for the comfortable seats by the window. "He's up for a knighthood," Lewis heard someone say and his interest was spurred. There was something lupine about the type; they all swerved together, as if someone had given a secret signal. Lewis was lost in the wonder of serendipity as he recognised the University's senior managers.

The Head of Department's eyes registered Lewis and slid away, back to his intimates. Twitch, the eyes flitted back to Lewis, sheepish now with the acknowledgement of their elitist exclusion.

“Lewis.” Featly left the group. “What brings you here, if you don’t mind my asking?” He turned his head, monitoring the reactions of his deserted colleagues and Lewis realised, with a child-like relish, that his boss thought someone else had invited him.

“Drink?” Lewis asked waving his glass vaguely in the direction of the bar. Featly vacillated, his head still swivelling round and round in uncertainty. “Oh, I, er, think someone might be getting me one.” Lewis could see post-prandial drinks shuttling across the bar, settling into welcoming handclasps, sealing a fine agreement of expansive geniality. “Well, I think I will,” he said with decision and got to his feet, leaving the boss to follow behind.

With four courses and coffee tucked away, the senior managers were enjoying the Ashfield’s range of single malts stolidly. Dinnerless and jubilant, Lewis joined them just as the Director of Finance was singing his soft, Irish lament of poverty.

“A science park? You’ll be needing to find someone to put up the funding. The coffers are bare.” The circle of raised eyebrows brought the formula of a self-deprecatory smile to his lips. “Bare-ish, anyway,” he amended, aligning himself back into the communal perception. “Have you approached the Regional Development Board?”

“We never have any luck there.” Featly’s fleshy lips pursed. “We are too speculative for them. They want quick returns. In and out, that’s their motto.” He breathed out a long, heartfelt sigh. “A Science Park takes years to turn a profit.”

“Maria had to rush off,” someone offered into the silence that followed and there was thoughtful raising of glasses, a confirmatory sipping of drinks.

“Had to get back for the kids. She can’t join in really, can she?” Maria was the sole woman on the senior management team, famous for her dark blue sports car. “She’s against the whole idea of a Science Park.” Eriksson moaned.

Lewis scarcely heard them. He could see the blood corpuscles milling behind his eyes; he could remember the hectic motion on the microscope slide; he could feel his time coming. The fast arrest of their lazy gazes when he mentioned US biotech money, the stiffening of the wolf pack, alert to the possibility of prey, was compensation enough for Featly’s rebuff.

“A money man, a Californian is coming over from the States. He’s interested in setting something up with me.” Featly looked put out.

“Of course, we had been thinking of Stephen Glatton,” he demurred. “A solid record, good contacts with the Japanese. He’s a very safe pair of hands.”

Safe hands, Lewis thought. Old man’s talk. What about energy and drive? Where will they come from? Featly tailed off without any noticeable support from the others.

“Is this the same project that the other contender’s been pushing?” The Director of Finance wanted to know. “Certainly not,” Lewis answered. “I’ve had my people working on this for almost ten years, now. That’s how long it’s taken to get anywhere near to commercialisation, but I always knew it would.” “We’ll talk about this tomorrow. Perhaps you could get something together, Featly?” the Dean suggested. He gave a nod in Lewis’s direction. “He’s one of yours, I expect,” and they all drifted away to taxis, to home, bed and their dreams of ermine.

Left alone, Lewis celebrated with another drink, and then another. If he wanted a slice of this new Science Park – and how he wanted one - he had to come up with a coherent pitch before tomorrow morning. Out in the car park he fumbled for his keys. Uncoordinated fingers dug around the lining of his pockets, groping for the fob. Christ, he thought, I’m drunk. I can’t drive home. He stood in the slash of light from the kitchen door. Grey-faced workers were filling the bins with the day’s waste and Lewis felt nauseous. It was too far for Amber to come and pick him up; he didn’t know what to do. But there was Rhea not a mile away and plenty of taxis around; she wouldn’t be in bed yet. The phone had hardly started to ring when she answered and Lewis just knew she would rescue him, that she would be able to comprehend his need over the airwaves.

In the car Lewis felt too large for his own body. Sitting in the passenger seat where the belt was adjusted for Amber meant that he had to breathe hard against the constriction.

“God Lewis, you stink of whisky.” He exhaled again, noisily and deliberately.

“You might get drunk on my breath.”

“Let’s hope I’ve got more sense. One of us has to be sober enough to get you home.”

Lewis luxuriated. How he loved being driven in his own car, by Rhea! The over-close embrace of the seat belt, the way he was unexpectedly gathered up and pressed back into the seat whenever she accelerated, made him feel swaddled.

“Sorry,” he said.

Rhea obligingly put her foot down.

“I’ve phoned Amber. You’re staying with me tonight.”

Lewis gave the belt a little tug to relieve a sudden pressure on his chest. “Why?” he asked cautiously. He set himself to reviewing his options. He might be in the doghouse at home. He tried to remember if it was a baby-trying night tonight, but the detail of the schedule had slipped somewhere out of his reach. There was another bewildering thought. But then, even drunk and hungry, he couldn’t seriously imagine that he was being made an offer by Rhea.

“Because I’m not driving all the way up to yours tonight. You’re lucky I came out at all. How come you got this wasted, anyhow?”

Lewis was prepared to acknowledge his misdemeanour: transgression seemed like triumph tonight. The multitudinous swarming tide of his semen sample was still carrying him along.

“Drinking.”

It seemed a perfectly sufficient answer to him but Rhea shot him a dirty look.

“It’s just that I thought there would be a dinner at the meeting, and there wasn’t. I haven’t had anything to eat.”

“Well, I’m not cooking at this time of night. You’ll have to get a take away.”

Lewis couldn’t keep the smile off his face. Its silliness spread about him, planning a long session.

“It’s supposed to be a punishment, Lew. You deserve to sleep in the car park.”

“Oh it’s a good punishment, Rhea. Honest.” His life was getting too good to be true. He probed for the flaw. “Am I in trouble? What did Amber say?”

“No, she was OK. She just said she couldn’t remember you telling her about a meeting tonight.”

He nodded ponderously. “Last minute thing.”

Rhea curved the car around a sharp corner, so that Lewis leaned, gently, to and fro, rocked in the security of webbing and airbags. He wanted the journey to be never-ending. He wanted to go on, forever feeling the unfurling of possibilities that had been tight inside him, while Rhea drove him, smoothing out the way forward.

There was still a kebab shop on Waterloo Road, although it must have been five or six years since Lewis had been there: certainly not since he had been married and subjected to the health police. A group of students was gathered in a semi-circle outside the shop, posing and posting photos of themselves. Lewis moved through them and into the shop feeling like the male lead in a film, revisiting his disreputable youth.

He ate his dinner in Rhea's kitchen while she made tea.

"The Deans wanted to see me about some idea they've got," he said, "for making money out of biotech."

"They haven't a clue," Rhea answered, "The Americans are years ahead of us. Wait until you meet Vic."

"I was wondering about Vic. He could help us catch up."

Rhea looked at him in disbelief.

"The only person Vic helps is Vic. Simple as, Lew. At least he doesn't make any bones about it. He doesn't like his time wasted either. I'm keeping Vic for ourselves. I don't owe that lot anything." She gave a quiet snort, to herself really, as if she thought he was some sort of apologist and didn't bother to look at him so he had to reach over the table and touch her hand to make her pay attention.

"I'm getting sick of making the effort all the time, and not knowing if it'll ever come to anything," she said straight into his face. "That lot have never been any help to us."

"You know what they're like. They're all delayed gratification." Lewis could feel his speech slurring in his mouth. For a moment, he tasted the bitter flavour of being old. "You wouldn't think they could afford to wait for anything at their age, would you?"

"At their age, waiting is probably all they can do," Rhea said, and took her hand back. She stirred the tea and pushed it across to him.

A sweet smell rose up from the cup: chamomile, honey and vanilla, Amber's bedtime drink. The essence of her filled the space between them. He watched the steam

rising in a drunken daze, confused by the juxtaposition of Rhea and Amber. Lewis's body always held a physical memory of Amber, interleaved with his skin. Under the swell of her breasts you could see her ribs. The four fingers of his hand fitted into the spaces between them so that he could feel her bones. Amber, so masked by her image, her make-up and her clothes armour against everyone else, she was so open to him. The knowledge that he was allowed to touch the skeleton that held her together, made him quail. But inside Amber there was something else, something so brilliant that it was like glacial ice, harder and more refractive than any other sort. And that was the thing that mesmerised him, reflecting light on to anything that came near. He shuddered with lust.

"Does she make you drink herbal tea at night?" asked Rea.

"No, ...nothing. ...Whisky," he tendered, half way between a statement and an enquiry, not certain himself which he had meant; it seemed such an admission, this late at night. But the ghostly tea was poured down the sink and, as the smoke and peat smell of the whisky replaced the cloying of vanilla, Rhea became herself again, smart and clever, pale skinned and dark haired: Modigliani-faced Rhea. Everyone said that it should be Lewis and Rhea who were the siblings: they looked so alike.

"I won't tell Amber," she said as she passed the glass. "I'll take your secret to the grave with me." She raised her eyebrows. Lewis wondered if it had been like this for Rhea and Dave. She had tea; he had whisky. And in the kitchen at night, they avoided talking about something. Amber was always asking him if he had phoned Dave or heard from him, but he had never really thought about it all, until now, when he was watching Rhea, by herself, pushing the glass casually across the table as though it was something that she always did.

Chapter 4

There was someone rapping on the other side of the door. However hard she grasped at the handle and pulled it towards herself, Rhea couldn't open it and the tapping went on. Sharp, insistent taps that faded as she struggled to listen, until they transformed into pats, soft, tentative pats, as though hands were searching for an entrance: a hollow sound instead of the solid drub. The stroke of sleep mixed with the thump of reality.

"Rhea, it's late. Are you awake?"

"I am now."

Rhea had to lean back onto her pillows to take it in. Last night she'd slept without stirring: the first time since Dave had left. Perhaps it was just the security of someone else in the flat. Lewis ensconced in the spare room had displaced the emptiness. He deserved to have woken up with a hangover, exacerbated by a stomach recoiling from the toxic takeaway, but no such thing. She could hear him bouncing about in the shower. You couldn't hear much through the rooms of the flat - it was in a purpose-built block with concrete walls - but the water pipes seemed to connect everything. Showering was an unexpected exposure. She could tell that he'd switched to power mode, the spray thickening to a drumming as loud as the rapping in her dream.

She closed her eyes against the furore, trying not to listen herself out of the calm she felt, lying still while someone else was busy. Lewis had brought tea, saying, *you're a star, Rhea. I was never as glad to see anyone as I was to see you last night.* Still lying with her head against the pillows she closed her eyes: still drugged by tiredness, still unwilling to make any effort to drag herself clear and interrupt the seductive drift from reality.

Amber was three, left behind when Rhea was taken to the hospital to see Dad. Too small, Mum said, she won't understand, and the neighbours had jumped in to take care of her. The sea-side, that was the thing. They would take Amber to the sea-side. But Rhea was torn between the honour of going by herself with Mum and a trip to the beach. She clung to her bucket and spade, reluctant to surrender them. Next door crouched down to level things out, and promised her, when you come back, you can come with us while

your Mum has a rest. Ice-cream. A paddle. It will take her mind off things, they'd said, standing up again and talking over her head.

Now, Rhea couldn't even remember the visit to the hospital; the very last time she ever saw her father slipped from her memory, but she hadn't forgotten the walk across the flat, grassy park towards the beach and the long distance from which she saw Amber. Her sister was digging furiously, with a desperate concentration; wet sand flew into the sky from her spade. Amber looked up and saw Rhea coming and her desolation broke into a boundless relief. She opened her arms, as wide as they could stretch, and she ran and ran over the scrubby turf towards her sister, as though her entire world had been set to rights. Rhea thought of it now. She had been tall enough and strong enough to pick her up and swing Amber round so that the beach and the sea and the sky - the entire universe - had revolved around the two of them.

She knew that no one would ever be so pleased to see her again. Not Dave, that was for sure, and she knew that this had always been missing; nothing had been able to match that feeling of being utterly necessary. That Amber's husband had said the very thing - *I've never been so pleased to see anyone* - it had been like a reinstatement of her own life: another setting to rights.

Later in the afternoon they had played on the see-saw. Amber was a good deal lighter than Rhea in those days and, with her sitting at one end, Rhea had stood in the centre, astride the pivot, and shifted her weight backwards and forwards so that Amber clung to the hand rail as she was jolted up into the air and then thumped down to the ground. Her little girl's face had creased with a mixture of terror and excitement and she had screamed in ecstasy. Hesitation held Rhea still in the bed. Perhaps it had been all terror that made her little sister shriek: the terror of being left out. Rhea had never felt the nervous foreboding that always plagued Amber, but she felt it now, uncomfortably late. After Dave's treachery, she wasn't sure that anything was what it seemed. The memory of Amber's shrieks had floated up to the surface of her mind unexpectedly; she tried to move through it - had she chased off Amber's fright? She couldn't recall the end of the story, just the feeling of dread, and standing between that abyss and her little sister. She only opened her eyes when the noise of the water stopped and was replaced by Lewis's voice.

“I’m all done. It’s your turn.” He hesitated outside her door. “I’ll get out of your way while you get ready, Rhea. I’ll wait for you in the café by the bridge.”

He was gone and Rhea got up in the awareness of absence: the sudden, unexpected absence of Lewis and the gradually accepted absence of Dave.

Amber might have called to check up on him. Rhea scanned her phone for messages. Nothing, so she flicked to her contacts list. First, of all her friends, her relatives, her colleagues, was Amber, right up at the top. A sense of augury gripped tight, squeezing her chest, alarming her all over again with its warning. It’s not an omen, she told herself. A is the first letter in the alphabet, that’s all.

The fridge door shut with a low, hissing sound like a sigh of relief or resignation. Whichever. Relief and resignation had become so intertwined in Rhea that she couldn’t distinguish them. Last night, she’d run along the canal bank to get away from herself. The water was fretting out an oily mist that gave the street lights halos. By morning the fog would have gone but Rhea had known she had a night to withstand first. She’d stamped her soles hard on the pavement, as though she could dent the surface, but her trainers were too compressible and she couldn’t hurt herself that way. She’d run the tension out of herself, until it oozed out in her sweat and she could shower it off.

Eventually she’d decided not to try to sleep. She defied it, and that, together with Lewis’s drinking, had done the trick. Sleep had crept up behind her and pulled her down so completely that when Lewis woke her in the morning, she thought that it was still night time.

They walked to work together, along the towpath. The summer had been so fine that the leaves on the trees were full of sugars. When they changed colour they hadn’t sunk into dingy brown. They were flaming with red and glowing with the deepest yellow. The colours above her were so vibrant that they echoed the missed heat of summer and she didn’t hear the papery rub of the loosened stems or the rattle of the drying leaves underfoot. Rhea wandered beneath them and was surprised to see the trees; she’d been too distracted to notice them all summer, but they had gone on just the same, doing their own work. Now the season was almost over, they’d changed in a final exultant flaunting of all they had been. Even Lewis was in no hurry to get to the lab; he was delaying their arrival, pointing out to her the tubes in the grass where the crane flies - spread eagled

everywhere - had emerged. She couldn't see the camouflaged escape tunnels at first but he lent her his sun glasses and they leapt into view.

Rain clouds were hovering in the west and a light wind was blowing up, but on the towpath it was sheltered and sunny. Two young men in fluorescent jackets stopped cutting the grass and examined the ground to see what Lewis had been pointing out. Catching Rhea's eye, they smiled at her: the sort of uncomplicated, early morning smiles that passers-by often gave, and that she had forgotten about.

"It's a lovely day," she said to Lewis and she meant it. He was unshaven, his shirt was crumpled and without his sun-glasses, his eyes were crinkled, as though the shabby ripeness of autumn had got into him too. A different, disheveled Lewis looked back at her. Dissolute and happy, he said "It gets better and better."

Rhea craved the laboratory. Ever since Dave had left, when she wasn't at work, she felt an enveloping homesickness for the certainties that it engendered: once she was there, uncertainty would evaporate in the fervour of activity. Usually, she arrived first into the cool quiet of overnight emptiness and switched things on until the room was alive with the companionable hum of the water baths and the centrifuges. But this morning, she walked into the lively pulse of work that was already underway. Warm, curious glances greeted her; they sparkled off and paused on Lewis, but it was to her that they returned: Rhea, who was so much more likely to come up with an explanation as to why she and Lewis were turning up together. Because nothing escaped friends who were together twelve hours a day; there was no hiding place. They knew more about your life than you did yourself.

The hair falling down Rhea's back was still damp and it caught and tangled as she ran her hands down it, pushing it out of the way. Longer, finer and straighter than Amber's. She liked her own hair better. What it lacked of Amber's magnificence, it made up for in its muted sheen. She let it trickle through her fingers and thought, it won't do them any harm not to know something.

She opened her lab book to the same old thing: another dozen cultures to harvest and check. If she didn't start right away, it wouldn't be finished before lunch time when she needed to set up the preparations for tomorrow, and then help Katherine with the gel apparatus. Every day was tight: all the actions like dominos tumbling down, one hitting

another so that they cascaded away into the future. One miss and the whole pattern stalled. She brought out yesterday's samples from the cold room: two hundred tubes in each rack, each of them waiting for a hundred microlitre squirt of the next reagent. It was difficult to do the same thing to four hundred tubes without missing one, but Rhea didn't need to think about it. A short circuit between her eyes and her hands had developed over years of practice. It didn't involve her brain at all and she passed the time by keeping an eye on the others.

Fazil was putting his dirty glassware into the dishwasher. Katherine and Joe were scanning yesterday's gel runs, but Andrew wasn't working: he was in the office, standing at the desk and leaning forward over Lewis, jerking his head in staccato bursts. Lewis's hands were up in a conciliatory gesture. He had an alarmed smile on his face. He rose and sent a silent appeal across the room towards her. *Come and save me again*, he signaled. Everything normal, the ordinary ups and down of laboratory life; the chunter of the academic assembly line. She raised her eyebrows and then her pipette at Lewis in return to his appeal. *You say you're the boss, you'll have to manage. I'm busy.*

Joe's trainers always squeaked on the composite flooring: she knew it would be him before she raised her head.

"Come and look for me, Rhea. What do you think?"

She went with him into a culture suite that looked as though it had been turned over. Flasks of cells had been taken out of the incubators and left lying about the open benches. All Joe's bottles of medium were opened and upended, pouring their contents down the sluice drain with a warm, yeasty smell. Rhea turned the taps full on to wash it away. Joe saw her shocked grimace.

"It's alright," he reassured her, when it so obviously wasn't. "No," he went on "all my cells are dead: every last one of them."

Rhea had to refocus the microscope to suit her eyesight. She thought it might be a bit high because the orange light of the phase contrast was blurred and she couldn't find the bottom of the plate and bring into focus the shiny, black-edged cells. Moving the eyepiece didn't help much; all she could see was the medium and floating about in it, swirling away whenever she shifted position, were the curled up remains of a dead culture.

“It has to be an infection.”

She couldn't see any yeast cells, swollen with their budding and dividing, or any swarms of bacteria scurrying around, clustering and sticking fast to the debris. But she couldn't think of any other explanation and she helped Joe dump his cultures into the biohazard waste.

Once they had been dealt with, Rhea checked all the other plates. Only Joe's were affected, but she took samples from them all, just as a precaution. She had a miserable apprehension that something unwelcome had penetrated their sterile firewall. It brushed across her like the unwelcome smell of a stranger.

She saw Joe's eyes darken with embarrassment.

“We'll have to tell the others.”

This could have happened to anyone, but it had picked out Joe. Dirty technique? Plain bad luck? He probably hadn't done anything to deserve it, but that wouldn't make a public confession any easier.

“We can't risk it spreading, Joe. They'll need to take extra precautions.” He nodded his unnecessary consent.

The quickest way was to take the samples up to the hospital for testing herself. Rhea knew the diagnostics technicians well - she'd often advised them on any advances in cell culture that might have a read over to their work - and they might process her samples quickly, as a favour. Twelve-thirty. If she could get up there before they started to sterilize their equipment, they might even put the tests up today. She hurried out through the lab, ducking into Lewis's office to pick up her car keys. Katherine, Fazil and Andrew were removing their glassware, quarantining it behind autoclave tape. Joe had already gained outcast status; he was loading his into the washer for an extra hot wash. Rhea tried to smile at him, to catch his eye, but he bent determinedly, as though sheer force of will could scour trouble from his reagent bottles. Rhea dreamed of disposable plastic bottles, but they cost such a lot that Lewis had bought a scientific dishwasher. And they could put everything through the autoclave. There was nothing that a good sterilizing wouldn't sort out, Rhea told herself.

At a high enough temperature and pressure, everything succumbed, eventually.

Everything seemed to include Lewis. By the time she got back from the hospital, it was raining and he had got wet coming back from some meeting or other. He succumbed to maudlin sentimentality. Last night's whisky was leaking out of his liver, finally having its way with him.

"Rhea, sweetie...?"

An unasked question dissolved in the air between them. Rhea and Lewis had always lightened their long hours by the competition to be top dog; for months on end that was all the fun they got at work. This sudden intimacy had all the flavour of too sugary a coating on a bitter pill.

"What?"

Rhea waited. Lewis put aside some papers that were on his desk, playing for time. Or maybe he was putting aside that whining tone because when he spoke, his words came out serious.

"I've had Andrew in here."

Rhea's mind flew back to the scene she had watched that morning: Andrew hanging over Lewis hadn't been the routine fracas of laboratory life, after all. "You know there are only a few months to run on his grant? He wants a definite commitment that I can still pay him next year. Otherwise he's after another job." Lewis's face was gloomy. "We can't afford to have him take his eye off the ball now. Not with the conference coming up." There was a calendar on the wall with the conference dates marked in black. Next to it hung a project plan, with the work schedule of each member of the team. They had used the colours of the rainbow for themselves: red, orange, yellow, green, blue. Without Andrew's yellow the target wouldn't be hit in time.

"As long as he's here, he should be pulling his weight," Rhea said, but the weight of ambiguity slowed her words. A glance out of the office showed Andrew preparing a fresh batch of culture medium for the whole group. Commitment was a two way process and Andrew needed his own chances too. She offered her best shot straight away, "The money that Vic mentioned..." before caution had time to kick in and remind her that the money wasn't actually in the bank.

"I knew you'd say that." Lewis squeezed her arm. "What would we do without you?" It seemed safe enough to believe that it would be fine, standing in the office by

themselves. Lewis, Rhea, Vic brought on board. But beyond the door there were hoards of people scrabbling after grant money. “We can’t promise him anything, Lewis. It’s not in the bag yet.” But Lewis was full of confidence again, reassuring her. “We’ve got stuff on our side: things to offer. The University’s building a Science Park. We can get a slice of that.”

Vic’s money. A Science Park. Finally. Rhea felt lucky.

“I’m going for my run,” she said. “Want to come?”

“I’ll race you,” said Lewis, stretching his arms out like some sort of origami. He might act a bit nerdy sometimes, but Rhea suddenly saw that her brother-in-law could be opened out into a series of fantastical shapes when he wasn’t absorbed in work. She’d been running regularly for the last few weeks and she knew for a fact that Lewis hadn’t. Between that and the delayed hangover, she guessed that she could beat him. She saw herself running first, out front, leaving him struggling behind. It felt like a great end to the day.

“I’ll beat you,” she said, pushing him back down in his chair.

Rhea was changed first. Waiting for Lewis out by the cinder track, facing into the wind, enjoying feeling how strong it was, she thought it a good sign. She’d been brought up on wind-swept beaches; she was relying on the weather hindering Lewis more than her. He came out flexing his hamstrings, loosening his extensors, but Rhea had already done all of that, and she only knelt down, tightening her trainers and checking her ankle supports.

They exchanged complicit grins; Lewis probably thought he could win too and they were both enjoying the attention from the laboratory windows. She felt the skittish flash of excitement that shot between them: their old competitiveness. They were both on their mettle. They counted in unison. One, two, and off after three. Rhea felt her legs spring forward as though they were leaving the rest of her behind. Crunch, crunch, crunch. They pounded the familiar track. All the times she had pounded it on her own seemed to have left some energy in it that bounced back into her feet now.

The comfortable, familiar rhythm set in. Twenty two, twenty three, she counted to keep herself steady. After fifty she lifted her head and looked to the left. Lewis was just behind her, breathing down her neck, but actually, that was right where she wanted

him, pushing her, keeping her pace up. Rhea planned to keep him there until the half way mark, to let him think that he was making ground. Then she would tire him with a slow pull away, and humiliate him with a final burst when he had nothing left to give.

When she made the first turn, the wind and wet slapped her hard in the face. It had started to rain heavily so that she couldn't see the roofs of the warehouses that were supposed to become the Science Park, but she knew where they were. She wondered if Lewis was as sure of winning as she was. By then, she could hear his breath rasping so she knew that he was close behind, and getting tired. Ready for the pull forward, Rhea pressed her head down. She put her shoulders into her chest, her chest into her hips and her hips into her legs and found the force to pound ten per cent faster. Even in the wet and the gloom there was a sense of Lewis at her left shoulder, so she pushed harder. Her heart was beginning to thud so she concentrated her mind on talking it down with counting. Fifty-six, fifty seven, but the faster she ran, the faster she had to count and the faster her heart boomed through her ribs.

When she could see the medical school, she could still hear him next to her. He had kept pace with her all this way and she began to think that he must have been training secretly, and playing with her. The smell of Lewis's sweat was easily distinguishable, but by then she couldn't tell his breathing from her own. Her breath grated, his breath grated, his foot punched, her foot punched. She grabbed at a moment and turned to see where he was and he was staring right back into her face. His eyes locked straight into her eyes. Her heart thumped, or was it his heart? She couldn't tell. She couldn't even count separately from him. Everything about them both pounded together up that track: leg, foot, leg, foot. Neither of them could break free of the bond.

When they reached the end of the course, Rhea wrenched herself away from him and leaned against the railings, putting her head back so the rain could wash down her. She tasted salt and she had no idea which of them had won.

*

"It's your own fault," Amber said. "You've both got exactly what you deserve."

Rhea saw the origami Lewis had folded back down into plain A4. Flexing his calf, he winced and looked to Amber with that 'sympathy-darling' expression he affected whenever she was there. Not that it did him any good.

“You’re like a pair of kids,” Amber complained. “Neither of you can admit defeat.”

Lewis and Rhea didn’t admit defeat with folded arms and hangdog laughs; they exchanged clenched fist salutes and folded themselves into the sofa and the sanctuary of the weekend supplements.

“What are you thinking about?” Amber couldn’t bear silence; she had to have someone to talk to, so that she could feel she still existed. She only felt alive when she could feel their concern, or sympathy, or interest. It wasn’t quite true, though. Rhea stopped reading to think about it. It wasn’t all one way with Amber; she was happy to be the one supplying the concern, the sympathy or the interest. Amber just needed to be involved. Lewis knew it too. He reached across and pulled her towards him.

“I’m thinking about when we are rich and famous,” he told her. The overstretched muscles in Rhea’s calves twinged as though they had been reminded of some further effort that they didn’t want to make. The race yesterday had given her enough to get over for the moment but Amber was already gone, living in her imaginary future. Rhea had to work hard to keep the irritation out of her face when Amber went off to the dining room and came back carrying cardboard sheets, printed up with photographs and attention-grabbing headlines.

She held one up. “Surprise. They’re for you two.” On it there was a photograph of a child, running with a football, and a huge caption, **Stem Cell Research Will Make the Difference**. She whipped out another, photographs of cells in different stages of differentiation all spreading out from a central stem cell: all in colour, matt and muted.

“Amber, where did you get them?”

“I lashed them up at work. You know what you said about the conference, about how everybody had to be both sides of the coin at once. You know: buyer and seller, talker and listener. Well, something like this on your stall is going to attract attention. You would only have to do the science thing.”

She lifted the board and peered around it, angling for approval.

“They’re fabulous, Amber.” Rhea smiled regretfully. “But it’s not going to happen is it? We could never afford the sort of thing you do.”

“I’ll do it for you. They won’t mind if I take up a bit of work time and stuff.” No, they wouldn’t mind, Rhea supposed. Amber was important to her company directors; she made them a shed load of money.

“It’s a good cause,” said Lewis. “We need to be as professional as we can,” - he fixed his eyes on Rhea - “for the American market.” There was a sudden sinking in Rhea’s stomach. Lewis was desperate for the money. And he always came back to Vic for it.

“But he hasn’t said anything definite yet.”

Lewis twisted his face anxiously, willing her to go along with his version of events. They went back a long way, Lewis and Rhea, longer than Lewis and Amber. But nothing like as long as Rhea and Amber. The husband and wife were both waiting for her say-so.

“I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll certainly do mine,” said Amber.

“And me,” from Lewis. And it seemed a pact had been signed.

*

As Lewis walked through reception, Prof Featly stood at the head of the stairs that led to the upper echelons, beckoning urgently into the lower reaches. His stage whisper carried further than most of his official pronouncements.

“I need a favour, Lewis. The Vice Chancellor’s setting up a platform for the Science Park, but I can’t make it to his reception. Would you mind giving up your Friday evening?” Lewis was spirited up to the second floor where the suite of professorial offices was situated, next to the scruffy, peaceful library. Sofa scientists, those professors, closeted in serenity. How he had always longed to join them, as far away from the fracas of the laboratory as possible.

*

The night of the reception was the first time that Lewis had been to the dining room in the Vice Chancellor’s Court. The VC was standing by the door shaking hands, so perfectly positioned between the oak panelling and the halogen light focused on a predecessor’s portrait, that the blandishing wood and the clear beam combined to give his bald head an ethereal glow, almost a halo. But the painted image of the old man, retired

for twenty five years, possibly dead by now, still exuded belligerent power. It glared down from the wall and diminished the current VC, for all his science parks.

Lewis shuffled Amber into the forming tailback. The Deans of the Medical and Dental Schools and some female apparatchik from neurobiology that he had noticed with a sweaty smear of schoolboys trailing after her on open day were ahead of them. Lewis trained his eyes on the little tableau in front of him and strained forward. The Deans disbursed effusive congratulations: such un-genuine delight in each other's successes. They were all enhanced by the reflected glory.

Then the real business began. Brief words were exchanged, just below the threshold of his hearing. A harpist was twanging away in the background, obscuring the conversation with her wretched overtones. Lewis edged nearer; *restructure*, he heard, or was it someone's botched operation, *re-suture*?

He couldn't be sure, but he thought he could feel consensus filling up the air. Cosy agreement bloomed out from the close circle of inclined heads and they parted. The VC was business-like, patting arms proprietorially. Some deal was done, but Lewis couldn't tell what. Bland, excluding glances came his way. He took them in, turned them into a comfort, a sure acknowledgement of his claim to be taken into consideration, soon.

The young neurobiologist was dispensed with efficiently; the VC was smiling, his eyes gliding from Lewis and greeting Amber with a practiced familiarity.

"Glad you could both make it."

The wood panelling and the spot light were casting their favour on Amber now. She glowed under the attention; even the dour, old portrait seemed to soften watching her and Lewis felt the fragility of pending uncertainty as he mounted the last few steps. The new carpet felt thick under his feet as he walked. He tried its spring and put his own professional smile into place, held his hand forward.

"Congratulations, Vice-Chancellor. We wouldn't have missed this for anything."

The VC didn't keep them long. There was a crowd of professors turning raucous over at the buffet and Lewis didn't feel like pushing his way among the calculated laughter. He'd expected a warm beckoning from the Deans, a discreet invitation to meet them, next week, perhaps, but none had been forthcoming. He might have been invisible.

Lewis remembered, when he noticed Amber bending attentively to listen to the school boy-toting neurobiologist, that her name was Helen - something or other. She had presented a paper at a departmental seminar on the development of neurons. Won some award, young scientist of the year or something, for it. He went to join them. But Amber wasn't fascinated by the details of nervous system organization. Helen, it turned out, had been near enough to hear what the Deans had said to the Vice-Chancellor. They had been talking about their plans for a new Science Park. The VC had been all in favour, apparently, had said that the University could only benefit from co-operation with industry. Outside agencies would be approached for their support, but he had insisted, specifically, that it would be only at Chief Executive level. Amber was astonished; she pressed Helen.

"Is it sorted then?" she asked. It seemed that there had been mention of papers being prepared, ready to be discussed at administrative planning meetings already ensconced in directorial diaries.

Lewis's diary was on his desk in his office, virginally empty of administrative planning meetings. His lips pressed themselves together in case his thoughts had any ideas of escaping through them. He felt as though he was standing, laid open, on a dais at the centre of the room, that everything was receding from him, that the chattering and scraping of forks and clinking of glasses being picked up and put down and picked up again endlessly was disappearing off into the distance. The harpist was playing still, and lisping the dirge of a deserted girl. The plaintive notes were the only clear sound left in the room.

"I had heard some talk," he got out, turning aside from Amber's dumbfounded look. "It's all a bit theoretical yet."

A silence came among them. Helen didn't volunteer any more information, Lewis didn't ask, and Amber proffered a bowl of peanuts, picked over and half empty.

Chapter 5

There were rowan trees at Snitter Heugh. The soil was only a few inches deep over the rock base but rowans had evolved for thin conditions and they survived. The summer was always short: there was only a spare ration of sun, but every year the berries burned red. Amber loved watching them darken and swell on the edges of the roadside but the birds didn't: they avoided rowan berries and left them so that they shriveled on the tree.

Families had to be nurtured on whatever there was. She tried, but Lewis and Rhea were so often unavailable to have happiness foisted on them, she thought wryly. They were actually too busy to realize that they weren't happy and there were so many things intruding and getting in the way of Amber's plans. She was coping with the new house all alone. Fat flies appeared in the kitchen; she heaved out the vacuum cleaner and began poking the nozzle around the windows where the dammed things were buzzing. Lewis didn't see the point.

"Don't bother. You're fighting a losing battle," he told her, as though she didn't know it.

There was a pathetic bleating noise coming from her phone, wanting to be charged. "Just leave it, Amber. It's not as though there's any decent coverage out here anyway." But she couldn't ignore the desperation of the plea, so she stirred and went to plug it in. It might have been a frown that passed across his face, like the threat of an encroaching worry that she still had time to clear away: Lewis, always distracted, or busy. When she'd left the sofa, he had too. Without turning round, she knew that he was over by the sideboard, pouring himself another whisky. When she went back to him she would be able to smell it, the smoky breath that reminded her of fires, too hot at the front, the cold sharp at your back.

"It's for my nerves," He laughed, excusing himself. He held out his fingers, feigning a trembling as evidence of his need for medication. The unmentioned appointment at the fertility clinic next week unsettled the atmosphere.

"Are you scared?" she asked.

“What’s to worry about?” answered Lewis, lowering himself carefully back onto the sofa, holding the glass, deliberately steady now, aloft. “Twenty three percent of all couples have infertility investigations.”

“What’s to worry about, Lewis, is what they’re going to say to us. We might find out we’ll never.....” Her voice weakened.

“Let’s face it, we won’t find out anything yet. It’ll only be the preliminary chat. It takes ages before they do anything.”

She could sense his detachment, the sanguine reliance on ‘ages’, a time that might never arrive. Lewis’s eyes strayed to the television remote and Amber’s baby began a slow recede into the distance, shunned by its father’s dismissal. She would have to call them both back, closer to her. Amber curled around Lewis, feeling for the fit of their shapes, the appeasing match as he shifted to accommodate her. Her shoes were on the floor and as she lifted her feet onto the sofa to escape the nip of the draught, Lewis’s hands drew forward to meet them.

“You’re cold,” he said, chafing at her ankles. “Perhaps you’re right, we should think about double glazing.”

Amber had poured all the money she had inherited from her grandfather into buying Snitter Heugh, and then, her salary. Even so, the mortgage was stretching things. There was always something seriously expensive needed to bring it up to scratch and Lewis had never been paid anything like what he was worth. Winter had set in now and exposed the house’s deficiencies. Sash windows strained against their cords; draughts scurried around the kitchen, biting at ankles. The entire place juddered with foreboding: double glazing would solve most of its woes.

“So suddenly we don’t have to worry about money.”

Lewis was right back with her now; the baby waiting in the wings for her to summon it. She sat upright and held his face between her two hands: fair, fine skin, but dark, rasping stubble that snagged your palms and reminded you of something persistent and unyielding. Something that felt thrillingly male. “You’ve got something nice to tell me, haven’t you?”

She breathed the Lewis smell in. It was hardly ever a chemical stench now he didn’t work at the bench; he was usually in meetings, making arrangements about his

Science Park. There might have been the smell of money, or aftershave. They were often mixed together in the business of PR. “Is this credit card-action? Or have you got promotion?”

“No - and no.” Same old caution. But he let her toes go and dug about in his pocket. “I thought you’d be stressed about the clinic appointment so I got you a surprise. Close your eyes.” In the dark, Amber took the present that came still full of the heat of his body. She cupped it in her hand. It fitted easily, with its supple, flimsy wrapping and its hard, silky inside.

“I chose it especially for you. It had your name on it.”

The best surprise was that Lewis had given it to her. For a day, or at any rate, an hour, he had stopped thinking of work. He had imagined what it was like to be her and brought her a present. A seamless band wrapped them together, close enough to hold a baby until it took root and grew. When Lewis was asleep he thrashed and tossed about the bed as though he was in it alone. Amber clung to the edge, lying still because he didn’t even know she was there. She had him to herself now, even if it was only for a short time. Opening the present, looking and admiring, wasn’t important, because it didn’t matter what it was.

“If we have any luck at the clinic, I’ll always think of this when I see our baby.”

She didn’t take her eyes away from Lewis, watching the glow of him having accomplished something so perfect.

“We could try tonight, just by ourselves,” he suggested and she pulled him to her.

“But look at your present first.” He was loose with anticipation so that his fingers slipped as he disturbed the soft wrapping. “It’s as amazing as you are. It’s a necklace of Amber.”

The sheaf of paper fell back and the amber glowed sensuous, as if it were lit by its own inner light.

“It’s lovely. I’ll always wear it. It’s like an amulet.”

Now Amber’s fingers touched the paper gently, folding it back to let the tawny light smolder onto its whiteness.

“It could set that tissue on fire,” she said, but Lewis was pulling the paper apart and showing her.

“Look, you haven’t seen everything yet,” he said, exposing the bare jewel.

A hideous insect leapt forward and stared Amber straight in the face. She pulled away and the whole thing fell on the floor.

“Oh no!” she cried out.

“Don’t worry.” Lewis bent to the ground and retrieved it. “It’s been like that for a hundred million years. It won’t have broken now.”

He cradled the omen with care. “I knew you would love it. Your mother chose the right name for you. You keep everything safe. Think how long ago this insect was alive. If we got it out, I might be able to sequence the genes because the amber has preserved it.” He ended on this patronizing note: another lecture to draw her into his world, to bind her up in the exhilaration that he felt all the time when he thought about science, when, actually, she wanted him in her world, rooted in the excitement of a man and a woman really and truly making life.

Lewis held the necklace up and the insect glared at her with fixed eyes, beads full of vindictive loathing for its captor. He would hang it around her throat. Amber reverberated with the chiming fear of something that she had trapped fast inside her: genotype, phenotype, whatever, dead for longer than anyone could remember. The softness in her had hardened around it, suffocated it, and there was Lewis having no clue as to how that felt. He was touching her breast now, communicating feelings of his own, his fingers swollen and clumsy, but they might have been touching someone else for all she could sense them.

A quivering that she hoped he would mistake for desire. “We could take a drink up with us.” She tried to smile but the stiffness of her lips must have made it seem like a grimace.

“We don’t need a drink. Look my hands aren’t shaking now.” He held out the fingers that had been touching her, steady as hands defusing a bomb. But Amber felt dangerous with need; that was all there was of her. She couldn’t let Lewis know the elemental rapacity of the jaws she wanted to devour him with. It was those fructuous insect teeth that had waited a hundred million years. She clung to him with the fearful, new ache of concealment, different from the familiar, old ache of lust.

All night the bead nourished itself on the heat from her body, its slippery surface wet with her and Lewis's sweat.

The next morning Amber knew that she actually hoped that she hadn't got pregnant under its influence. The feeling grew in her, that the baby wouldn't have been hers in some way. But in her hand, the amber glowed red; the most expensive sort of amber there was. Lewis had given it to her as a promise. *When we are rich and famous*, he always joked. This gift had added, *when you are pregnant*. She was too frightened to wear it and too frightened to leave it off. To please Lewis, she told herself, she wore the necklace under her top at work. All day long it hung, heavy and contented, between her skin and her clothes and it made everything go wrong.

A day like this needs a decent burial, she decided. She couldn't just walk away and leave it there waiting for her tomorrow. Amber looked at her face in the mirror: it wasn't something she wanted to see – a face that looked as though it should never have come in to the office today. But still she couldn't take her face off. She pushed the necklace further down out of sight.

Before she went home, she called at Rhea's flat.

"I'm hacked off," she informed her disconsolately and threw her coat onto the sofa, where it landed, draped over the sag that still marked Dave's place. "You would think that after all I've done for that company, they'd let me use their printers for an hour or two." She plunged down into the single armchair which cooperatively took up her shape while Rhea studiously avoided meeting her eyes.

"So the boards are off then," she said and her shrill note of triumph caught in the large vase on the table and made it ring.

"No way," Amber said. "I'd never let you down. We're running behind on the Howie contract, so I said I'd stay late again tomorrow to catch-up. I'll run the boards off at the same time. They can't exactly complain, can they?"

"Do you want some tea?" Rhea asked, making off to the kitchen. "Oh look I'm out of your chamomile stuff. Will you have something else?" she called, increasing the gloomy disquiet she'd left in the living room. Amber followed her into the kitchen to find Rhea gazing at the empty packet. "I gave the last of it to Lewis the other night when he stayed."

“I don’t think so. You wouldn’t get Lewis to drink chamomile tea.”

“He poured it away.”

The kettle boiled up and switched itself off.

“Anything will do,” Amber said. “I’m not fussy.”

“Ordinary tea for the both of us, then.” The note of triumph returned to Rhea’s voice, as though she had got her way again, cut the ground from under them so that ordinary was the most they should hope for. Amber wasn’t going to let that happen.

“Did you know that Lewis had got me a present?” Amber could feel a quaking in the corner of her mouth as she said it, as if the words had left too big an emptiness when they shot out. Instability was unsettling her. She could see Rhea watching her, working out whatever answer she thought would suit her best. Her sister had a face like a map, if you knew how to read it. Rhea would be thinking as she spoke, trying to have the same thoughts as her sister so that she could make her a present of whatever she wanted to hear. Amber felt weary. The burden of gratitude for all these gifts was wearing her out.

“We could have a drink,” Rhea said.

The bottle of wine was already in Rhea’s hands and smiling widely at them both was the bottle stopper that Amber had given her. A tiny ghost laughing in delight and spreading out its arms in welcome.

“No, thanks,” said Amber. “I’m driving.”

“Right.” There might have been an uncertainty there, a premonition of pain in Rhea’s voice, as though she was the one who expected trouble now.

“It was a scientific specimen.”

Rhea sighed and didn’t answer so Amber crossed the kitchen impatiently. Looked outside at the night.

“The present that Lewis gave me, it’s a scientific specimen, like a blueprint of the universe,” she said, “phenotype and genotype both at once.” That gave Rhea something to think about and Amber the satisfaction of triggering the answer she had expected.

“Who told you all that?” Rhea snapped.

“Since when did I need somebody to tell me everything? I worked it out for myself.”

She shifted uncomfortably at the untruth, at the startle in Rhea's eyes that warned her to keep her distance from the private territory of work. For a moment Amber had a glimpse of that world: a picture of Rhea at work with Lewis, the pair of them wallowing in their cold-blooded dismembering of the process of life, the reduction of living to a series of intimately controlled, laboratory experiments. Rhea would have encouraged Lewis to buy the necklace for her, to keep her happy. They would have been speaking for a while, thinking of her, then dismissing the thought as they turned back, vindicated, to their elevated calling.

"Actually, I've read a couple of Lewis's textbooks, to help me with the boards. I'm not stupid you know."

The words came out harder than she had intended, untempered by her superhuman effort to be reasonable. She wondered if Rhea had noticed, and she had: her face was buckling. Her feelings were pulling it around because she couldn't keep that world all to herself.

The wretched specimen thing was caught; Amber was trying to drag it over her head, but it wasn't going to come off easily. It tangled in her hair and caught there, hanging and swinging while she struggled to get rid of it.

"Just look at it. Look."

"Wait." Rhea took the thing in her hand, the necklace. "Wait."

Amber had to stand there, and keep still, until her hair untangled and the necklace slid away, smoothly into Rhea's fingers. With it gone she retreated to the living room sofa and watched from a safe distance. Rhea was staring the creature out, awed.

"Amber, you lucky thing. It's fabulous."

Then starting tears magnified the perplexity in her sister's eyes. Amber knew then that Rhea hadn't chosen the present; she'd never seen it before this moment when it had ambushed something in her. She was surely thinking of Dave, of the dent in the sofa where he should have been sitting. Now the necklace truly seemed a cruel, taunting thing dangling from her fingers: a nemesis for the both of them.

Amber tried to save them from its grim hold.

"Lovely? A dead thing staring at you like that?"

“It’s made of amber. It’s got everything about you in it. I never thought that Lewis would be romantic.”

The insect hung suspended between them stupefied, unable to fly away.

“Well, it’s precious because it’s ancient, isn’t it.” Rhea went on, holding out the necklace, with its amber and its insect clasped together for all time. Amber tried to smile to show that she understood the way Rhea felt, but only a baleful stare came back at her, barring her from having any adverse opinion. The wrap of her sister’s fingers around the necklace looked like a dangerous trap, baited with something that only pretended to be tempting.

“That’s just the sort of thing that Lewis says.” Amber pushed her face up close to Rhea. “Well, I don’t like it and I’m going to tell him.” The disapproval registered in Rhea’s silence drove her on. “The thing is, Rhea, Lewis likes being frightened of me. You didn’t know that did you? It’s the only way he knows he’s alive.”

It seemed so true once she had said it, that Lewis liked being frightened of her, even though she had only said it to defy Rhea. Rhea, with all her studied cool, really knew how to get to you. This will hurt, but it’s for your own good. There would be a sweet and a sticking plaster with a smiley face on it, and you would find yourself bewildered, trying to believe her.

“I’m not wearing it,” she vowed.

*

The bottle stopper that was a tiny ghost, laughing and spreading out its arms in welcome: every time that Rhea saw it, she was swept back to the memory of her little Amber running towards her in delight and found that she was carried away on a tide of love. Adult Amber, with her new wardrobe of thwarted emotions, was quite something else. Her body had a mind of its own and her feelings didn’t belong to herself any more. They belonged to that primordial urge that had taken her over. Rhea tested her own abdomen and felt its flat integrity with a vague emptiness. She and Lewis would have to take up the slack until Amber got what she wanted, or found a way to live without it.

She checked her e-mail: some of it from friends and colleagues; lots of it from opportunistic spammers with the know-how to breach the university firewall, but nothing at all from Vic. There was something menacing about his silence; you hated it but you

didn't want it to end. An absent Vic might mean he was off being wooed by some other group. She wandered off into the deserted cell culture suite. She was the only person who went in there now. Everyone else's cells perished, but as long as Vic was incommunicado, Rhea didn't have to admit it. And she didn't want to confess because no one was going to invest in a research group with a jinx hanging over it.

It was hard enough keeping it quiet in the department. The honey pot smell of the money rolled around the corridors, along with the rumours that Lewis was expecting some, attracting a constant procession of visitors to the laboratory. There was Glatton for a start: he'd taken to dropping in at all hours under the pretext that there was some collaborative project that could be fixed up. He'd got the idea that he and Lewis could both have a role in the Science Park. Lewis sniggered behind his back, however conciliatory he was to his colleague's face. Glatton watched and pretended not to, while the trouble with the cells festered like an untreatable wound. Steven was practically a fixture around the place now. Him, and the tinnitus of anxiety.

The humid, carbon dioxide breath of the incubators mixed with the brothy smell of medium as she opened the incubator door. The stainless steel shelves, wiped with bacteriostat until they gleamed, gave no clue as to the cause of the trouble and the medium feeding the cells was a clear and used-up yellow: a sure sign of growth.

"How do you do it?" Lewis wondered, slipping in beside her.

Even while he was asking her, she knew she couldn't tell him. There was no way she could really explain how she did her culturing. The words you would have to use didn't work in the laboratory because when Rhea checked her cells, she just thought about how they were doing from their own perspective. If Fazil, or Andrew or Joe or even Katherine saw their cells were struggling they would immediately subject them to extra washing, extra feeding, an increased vigour in their regime. But Rhea thought that it would hold them back, all that punishment. If her cells seemed sparse and fragile, she let them have some peace until they seemed to feel better: not the sort of thing you could talk about.

"Treat 'em mean and keep 'em keen." She covered her embarrassment with a joke but Lewis couldn't see the funny side of the failure of his hopes.

“You’re what’s standing between us and disaster, Rhea. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

Usually Lewis didn’t admit to any worries. He never showed uncertainty, but he couldn’t hide it now. There were a couple of flasks of her cells on the bench. He lifted his hand towards them but hesitated and drew it back as if he were afraid to pick them up, as if his touch might be the contaminating one.

He’s right. It isn’t funny, she thought. All this laughing and teasing, it’s because we don’t know what the problem is and until we know that, we can’t start to put it right. She picked up the flasks herself and held them to the light. Even without a microscope she could see the vague clouding of the extra-cellular matrix.

“These are OK,” she said to Lewis, “I’ll keep on treating them mean.”

Somehow she couldn’t stop the joking but Lewis’s resilience was worn to nothing. He was looking away, anywhere but at her.

“I can’t manage without you.”

His voice was scarcely more than a whisper; it disappeared into the surroundings as though it had never existed. They stood together in silence, in an empty space that was filling with a desolate empathy. There was a burst of feverish talk from the lab. They both looked across to the door, feeling the presence of the others. Rhea spoke quickly, and softly, as if that could protect them from having to know. “Don’t worry them about it. You and I, Lewis, we’ll keep on until it’s sorted.”

Lewis was hugging a large sheaf of paper to his chest. For some reason they made her think of the amber necklace and she wished she could ask him what had happened to it but it didn’t seem possible to say anything without betraying Amber. There were too many things that shouldn’t be mentioned.

“What are they?” she asked, nodding towards the bundle.

“Handouts.” He grinned heroically and clutched them closer. “I’ve just got them off the photocopier. There’s nothing like a warm lecture.”

The way Lewis put on a brave face made Rhea feel better too. She poked her finger at the paper. Yes, it was still warm. She glanced at the clock: ten to twelve.

“You’ve left it a bit late, haven’t you?”

The space outside the lecture theatre would be filling up, dozens and dozens of students all waiting for clever, sexy Dr Lewis to deliver his warm lecture. She could see that he knew it, and was going to take consolation from his hour of hero-worship. She had to keep on worrying about the cells for both of them.

It made her brittle with determination. If anyone had tapped Rhea she might have shattered into a thousand pieces. Only washing up was soothing. The water poured with a constant drum into the stainless steel of the sink, splashing the surround as she rinsed and tipped, tipped and rinsed. Her hands were numb from the cold, she fumbled with a bottle and it crashed to the floor, rolling off. Rhea sighed. There must have been something heart-rending about that sigh, because Katherine abandoned her DNA extraction.

“I’ll do that for you. It’s only fair.”

Fair? It seemed such an unexpected concept in the rough and tumble of research, but Katherine hadn’t lost sight of it. Majoring on kindness, she took the bucket, too full of soaking glassware and slopping over onto the floor, and carried it along to her own bench. The feeling must have been infectious; things could take a hold like that. Everyone wanted to help Rhea, now that Katherine had pointed out how much she was doing for them. But that was the home team. They would be kind, but peer review would be merciless; the smallest crack would be probed until it opened up into a chasm. She could sense the fracturing of the ground under her feet even standing at her own sink. Rhea touched her fingers to the bench. Wet, slimy. She was too busy to clean up behind herself.

There has to be a rational answer. It's not the evil eye.

Some place in her mind there was an idea taking form. It felt like the long, slow roll of a wave working towards her. But just as it came near, it would let go of its tight curl and splash away, its potential dissipated and lost. She felt the beginning of the swell now. *I can't manage without you*, Lewis had said, so quietly that the words passed right through her. She stood still, so that not the slightest movement of hers would ripple out to disturb the wave’s delicate equilibrium, but the usual thing happened. The drops of water sparkled apart and she was left to finish the clearing up.

*

They were claiming their boasting rights: that was all it was. Natural and necessary. Figures were being bandied around, gross exaggerations, surely. Lewis could hear them inflating at every telling, and at the same time, the morale of the romancers rising to ever greater heights. The same was true of the rivalry between them; the grosser the achievement, the more exaggerated the performance of those tell-tale gestures. Gimlet glances and squaring-up postures ballooned as the glasses emptied. Lewis restricted himself to a single drink; no repetition of last time's drunken episode would be tolerated by Amber, but he had treated himself to the Ashfield on the way home with a mounting sense of desperation. He hoped to meet, by miraculous coincidence, the senior management team, to gain confidence and succour from their interest, but the crowd in the bar were sales reps, sparring after a taxing month: not so very different from the senior management team actually, but little use to him.

He watched the drinkers winding themselves up to greater heights: accuracy and probity disenfranchised to the greater good. Those sales targets would be raised next month, and they would have to be met, somehow. Ever-increasing expectations prodded at Lewis. This near to losing his research, even one drink induced a haze of compelling recklessness. Whatever it takes, he promised himself, whatever it takes.

*

The whole of Lewis's group gathered together for the final ritual of disposal, gazing at one another in an elaborate tangling of innocence and guilt. It felt like retribution, undeserved, and for a crime that had been so subtly executed that they didn't know they had committed it. Team solidarity was never as solid as when someone else joined the accused. Joe's pariah status had been revoked. Once Fazil's and Andrew's and then Katherine's cultures had died, he had been absolved of exclusive identification with blame. The price of Rhea's inclusion had been the loss of her cells too.

No trace of her cultures was to be left in the laboratory. They were to be annihilated, together with whatever had killed them. Disposal was an upsetting business: piling all the cells, the plasticware, everything that had been in contact with them, into the biohazard waste. Rhea led the entire group, all of them carrying the sealed bags down to the commercial grade disposal facility, set in its concrete base in the basement. The old autoclave produced reactions of awe in the youngest members of the team. They turned

to Rhea with bewildered expressions - surely you don't expect us to run this, the aggrieved set of their mouths was saying - and she realised that it was probably older than most of them. But the old autoclave still had its insurance certificate and she had operated it constantly, before they had been able to afford the tiny, user-friendly units that lived upstairs in the lab.

It took two hands to lower the autoclave lid. Rhea did it herself while the others stood watching: watching the tightening of the massive bolts and the checking of the ungainly safety valve. And watching her too, she realised. There was a querulousness about them as they distanced themselves from such a brutish task. Their speechless, sideways glances betrayed a discomfort with someone who was so plainly at ease with the monster. Their gracelessness - it wasn't her fault that she had need to learn all this before technology had become so sophisticated - made her graceless. She fumbled at the valves and stabbed at the isolation switch on the wall. There was something profoundly depressing about being the only person who knew how to manage this anachronism. She put on a face that she knew wouldn't fool them.

"A clean start," she said. "I'll unfreeze some of the back-up supplies, but not until we've decontaminated everything again."

The aftershocks of the catastrophe were rumbling around the lab. Andrew deserted, scuttled off to the library. Fazil was swabbing the benches down with sterilising alcohol, again. They couldn't possibly need any more cleaning but at least it gave him something to do. Katherine was loading the dishwasher, again. The celebrity status of being the only one to have any success fell clear away from Rhea, but at least it didn't seem to matter to Katherine. She came trooping down the lab to collect Rhea's washing up, as usual.

"Thanks."

It hardly seemed enough to say to the only person in the lab who could still raise a smile and Rhea didn't want to burden her with the job of going back down two flights of stairs to switch off the autoclave, so she went herself.

The basement was littered with junked equipment. Old centrifuges, missing some vital component, and spectrophotometers, out-of-date and no longer useful, were piled around the walls. Rhea could remember using some of the specs when she had been a

student, but already they looked as though they had lain undisturbed for a hundred years. Once something was out of commission, it disintegrated faster than you would believe. She opened the covers to look for the prisms that directed the light beams in them. Highly refractive glass could split daylight, and perhaps even the fluorescent torrent in the over-lit basement, into perfect rainbows. She had taken one from a pensioned-off machine like these when she was a post-grad and kept it on her bench, but it had got lost in the move to the States. The feeling came to her that if she could replace it, she would go back to being the sort of person who had made those rainbows, and everything else would go back to normal. How could it not, with the laboratory full of coloured light? While the autoclave cooled, she searched each of the discarded specs, but every one of the prisms had been taken already. Some other student was having their daylight split into arcs that bounced vividly around bare laboratory walls.

“Rhea?” It was her name that came bungling around this basement, made flat and clumsy by the heaps of rubbish. She pushed the spectrophotometer lids shut, secretly, and holding them carefully at the last minute as they slotted into place, so that they wouldn’t make a noise, as if she was doing something wrong. More pointless guilt for another uncommitted crime, and it was only Lewis looking for her. The same free-floating anxiety that she was feeling must have brought him down to help her.

She opened up the safety vent and let the last of the pressure off into the air. In the hiss and spurt of the old autoclave, Lewis’s voice left him and attached itself to the noise of the escaping steam. Rhea shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. He was looking expectantly in her direction but she had no idea what he had said.

“I was looking for a prism in the old spectrophotometers,” she shouted and Lewis raised his hand to show that he had understood. He took it as an instruction and began to check the specs, methodically opening them in turn. The commotion of the steam was trapped under the low ceiling and rather than shout across the room again, Rhea crossed to him and said into his ear, “I’ve already done it.” Lewis started upwards in surprise and scanned the basement uncomfortably as though he was afraid someone might have heard her. “I’ve already checked the specs,” she said just as the steam finally died away, so that her voice sounded loud and vexed in the sudden quiet. Lewis bent further over the metal casing, delving deeper into the innards of the machine so that she couldn’t see his face.

“There’s bound to be one somewhere.”

Rhea pulled him up, saying, “It doesn’t matter, Lew,” and dusted off his lab coat. She realised that it must have been a while since he had worn it because it was tight across the chest. He was burrowing into the equipment again, still hoping to find a prism, and the coat seams were strained across his back, as though it belonged to someone else. Perhaps he had put on weight, she thought. She couldn’t actually remember when she had last seen Lewis work in the lab. He kept his back resolutely turned, but he muttered into the mechanics and electronics.

“We might have to think about Plan B,” he said.

When she pointed out that it really didn’t matter, he stood up and said it did matter, with such a serious expression that Rhea was disconcerted.

“Vic can’t tell one cell line from another. Just while he’s here, until we get over this, it wouldn’t matter if we labelled up some of the old lines that are still OK as though they were the new ones.”

Rhea started to laugh, as though it was a joke between them, but she knew already that it wasn’t and the faux giggle came out sounding like a snigger. Lewis turned away, unable to look her in the eye and while he wasn’t watching, she rearranged her face into an unconcerned smile and led the way back upstairs, pretending that she hadn’t heard.

Side by side, Lewis and Rhea both watched Katherine unloading the dish washer. Fazil was still sloshing disinfectant across everything he could lay his hands on.

“They rely on us. We can’t let them down.” Rhea looked at Lewis and knew that he wasn’t talking about the prism.

“Oh Lew,” she said, “We can’t do that.”

All the commotion of the cleaning had made Rhea calm, as though her brain had been scoured free of all the debris cluttering it up. The glassware that Katherine was stacking out of the washer was sparkingly clean. It reflected a sharp, clear light, glinting in the racks, almost as bright as the prism. Scalding water vapour from the machine was clouding the glass partition, individual droplets coalescing into running streams. The wave that rolled towards Rhea gathered itself and didn’t break.

“That’s it,” she said. “Katherine’s started putting my washing up in the machine. That’s why my cells have died.”

How could it have been so easy? Only Rhea didn't bother with the new dishwasher. She quite liked standing at the tap, cleaning her own glassware; that was her thinking time. Something in the washer detergent hadn't rinsed away and had poisoned their cells.

Excitement prickled all over her skin. It was like a plasma ball, the sort she used to play with as a child. Wherever you touch it, that's where the energy rushes. It was this tautness that held her, bound her life, made her quicken. At the end of the day Lewis visited the culture suite, hooking out one of the high laboratory stools to keep her company while she gave a final check to the fresh plates. They didn't mention Plan B again. It seemed like the product of a fading nightmare: a time apart that had no hold on them now. It was only a few months until the conference but by working non-stop, they could do it. They fell into easy step as they walked along the corridor together, the automatic lights flickering on seconds too late, so that their shadows kept leaping in front of them in a disordered relay race for the exit.

Chapter 6

Lewis's mouth tightened.

"Amber?" Rhea usurped his thoughts before he spoke. "Don't worry. I'll give her the injection tonight."

This late in the year sunset came early. In the half light shadows hazed before them. When Dave had gone, Rhea had run to the laboratory for cover. She left it now with Lewis, the knowledge of her dishwasher discovery tucked tight under her coat. It was simpler than love, more certain anyway, and she didn't need anyone to share this. That knowledge warmed her from the inside out, so that in spite of the frost it felt like the steady rise of the thermometer towards summer.

Stephen Glatton was crossing the quadrangle; she and Lewis turned instinctively in on themselves to avoid him and stepped sharply into a narrow service road that ran to the back of the building. At the same time a delivery truck turned the corner: a truck with dual headlights, bright to her dark-adapted eyes, so she couldn't see the driver behind them. He hit the horn; they'd slipped off into the dark and been caught in this fractious light. She crushed up to Lewis in a doorway as the lorry slowed and carped into low gear, its long overhang passing inches from their faces and blocking out the view. When it had gone, they waited in the untroubled space that it left behind. For the past month the quadrangle had been covered with wet leaves so that footsteps had been stifled. But once the groundsmen had finished cutting back the summer flowering shrubs, they'd swept away the damp carpet. Everything was ringing clear, the way it only could in the bareness of winter. Rhea could still hear the rapping of Glatton's leather soles on the frozen paths, but the noise was retreating. He couldn't have seen them.

"You don't like him, do you, Rhea?" Lewis asked. The thickness of the re-established dark insulated them from public scrutiny. The truth was closer here than in the busy lab. Stephen was certainly a pain, but he was also a rival.

"Remember the way he rolled over for Amber?" In the dark she could feel Lewis rear up. "It might come to him or us," he said, "Best keep it simple."

Satisfaction at solving the tissue culture problem melded with gratitude at being associated with Lewis, always that bit ahead of the curve, rather than tag-along Steve.

Wherever Stephen went he left something unlooked for behind him – something that you couldn't see or hear, but you could feel it. You knew it was there, shadowing you.

Rhea reached and tousled at Lewis's hair, somewhere between happiness and a dissolving sadness and he laid his arm across her shoulder.

"Stick with me, baby." Lewis was looking back, making sure that Glatton had gone. "And don't let that surrender monkey collar our post-docs while I'm away."

She laughed. She rattled his filing cabinet keys in her pocket and they separated as they wandered back into the empty twilight of the quadrangle. Glatton's footsteps had dwindled to nothing and as they parted, Lewis and Rhea exchanged a look made of trepidation mixed with irrepressible swells of hope.

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The garage provided paper towels to wipe your hands but the roll was empty. Rhea forgot that she wasn't wearing her lab coat and rubbed the grime down the back of her jeans. It didn't matter, she could take them off as soon as she got to Amber's, have a shower. Here she was, looking forward to a night's retreat with her sister. Food cooked and freshly made beds were the tokens of Amber's love - she gave them because she couldn't imagine life being any other way. Amber knew how to spoil you like no one else. But even while she was looking forward to it, Rhea felt the nervousness that Amber's spoiling brought on. It came at a price. At Snitter Heugh, it would be dark in the shade of the courtyard where the house cast its shadow, but over on the hills, edging the horizon, there was a thin line of reflected light from the city. It gleamed red. *That glow tells us it's the entrance to hell* Amber was fond of saying. *Don't stay there.*

Already provisional tendrils of Amber were insinuating themselves into the countryside: new life, new friends. Then, if the IVF treatment did any good, there would be a baby to occupy her. Rhea felt the pivot of Amber's affection waver dangerously between suffocation and abandonment. She was reassuring herself: filling up the car for the journey home.

Darkness hid the actual state of the house and made it seem elegantly romantic until the security lights blazed on. Then you could see that it was run-down and neglected. Rhea wondered how long the rural adventures would keep her sister happy. Even for Amber, labours of love had their bounds and she wasn't going to get any help

from Lewis. At the same time she felt spasms of affection for them both. And the steady beat of optimism for her own future.

In Amber's house, showers came with apricot scrub: creamy and gritty at the same time. Should you rub it slowly or fast? It was surprising that Amber hadn't come into the bathroom to supervise. Rhea rubbed fast. Poring over cell cultures tired you, but it didn't wear you out. If her hip bones jutted, it must be the running. Amber could never lose weight. She was destined to hover, just on the brink of ripeness, only a dessert away from disaster. The scrub rinsed off but the delicate smell stayed with her, keeping Rhea company. She kept remembering that the cells could grow now, and she didn't have to worry about a thing.

Amber was in the guest room, folding Rhea's clothes, piling them on the bed.

"I've put your jeans in the washer for you, babes. They'll be ready by tomorrow."

There was a lipstick echo of Amber's smile on a tissue by the bed. She was imprinted on everything: Amber, who couldn't leave you alone. You only had to drop your guard long enough to shower and she had rearranged your laundry and your life behind your back. Nothing to worry about, Rhea reminded herself. For the next few hours, she could just give in. The smell of apricots drifted around with her, enveloping her in its enervating taint of abdication.

Amber sat on the edge of the bed, indulging her liking for physical closeness; Lewis had gone to Manchester, but she would have come wandering in even if he'd been there. She hated being alone, even for a short time and without him she would be roaming around the house looking for someone or something else to be connected to. Amber didn't speak, but just watched, her eyes roving over Rhea's face. She couldn't pass a mirror without looking for herself in it, checking she was there. If the mirror was someone's eyes, so much the better.

This was the first time they'd really been able to chat together since Rhea's split with Dave but there was silence. They both waited.

Amber began putting Rhea's clothes into the drawer.

"Are you alright now Rhea, about Dave? Do you miss him? Or," - she closed the drawer and Rhea's clothes disappeared - "are you ready for further punishment?"

“Give me a break, Amber. I’ve been really busy all day and I’ve only just got here.”

But Amber wasn’t put off so easily; she stood closer, so that Rhea could feel her warmth and hear her raspy breathing, the sound of her childhood. “I was talking to Mum. We both thought it would be best if you could meet someone at work. You’d be as bad as each other.”

The dragnet of scrutiny closed around Rhea.

“It wouldn’t be much fun for me, though,” Amber went on. “You and him and Lewis. I liked Dave.” She ignored Rhea’s grimace; she brightened. “At least Lew could report back to me.”

“You had better let Mum know that you got it wrong. Personally, I can’t see Lewis spying for the pair of you.”

Which of them knew Lewis best? They watched one another, each occupied by the same thought. They both sighed and looked away. Lewis and their mother. They could share that problem.

“He’s wary of her,” Rhea said at last. “The mother-in-law.” Amber looked shamed. “I don’t know why.” She excused her husband and mum in the same breath. “I’ve always thought....”

“I know,” said Rhea and took her hand. “He only wants to impress her.” They both paused at the immensity of the task that Lewis faced: living up to the memory of their father and his bequest, the income from the factory, even after his death.

There was a day that dangled in both their memories: the two of them with Mum; Lewis, off parking the car.

“You’d be pregnant in no time if you weren’t working so hard.” their mother had said, leaning over the stone bridge, looking away from them down into the water. Amber tipped a stone over the parapet. The splash of it could be heard as it hit the surface, but then it went on dropping, tipping and weaving through the water. No sound at all came up when it struck the bottom. “Just don’t tell Grandpa. Don’t let him know Lewis doesn’t make enough to keep you. He won’t like it, you know.” And there had been Lewis’s tense, white face, hanging behind her shoulder, realising that she didn’t think he was good enough. If he hadn’t minded until then, he always had afterwards.

“Why don’t we do it now?” Rhea asked, “Get it over with before supper?”

Amber was unwilling; Rhea pushed. “Go on down and get it while I get dressed.”

Amber wanted her injection but she didn’t. She stood up too slowly and her fingers steepled as though she was praying for deliverance. She radiated confusion, so that Rhea’s skin crawled with it too. “Go on,” Rhea urged, “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Will we do it downstairs?” Amber asked. All at once it was *we*. They were in this together. When Lewis had been there, it had been all *us* and *you*, *Rhea*.

“Yes. Whatever. We can have something to eat afterwards.”

When Rhea got into the kitchen Amber had set the table, the two places opposite one another with a covered dish of something between them. She poured a glass of wine and offered it to Rhea.

“I’ll have one later. You have it now,” Rhea said but Amber shook her head.

“I won’t have any, just in case it makes a difference. I don’t want there to be anything to regret afterwards. If it doesn’t work, you know.” She put down the wine and nodded towards the fridge and the IVF injections, eager, but reluctant too.

The huge, brushed steel, American fridge was out of place in the shabby kitchen. It took up the whole of one wall. Rhea guessed that it was for all the local, pesticide-free produce Amber was making a religion of these days. Now it held the cocktail of chemicals that would force her to super-ovulate, so that her baby could be made in the hospital laboratory. In Rhea’s mind there was a clear, strong image of cells flourishing under her own care, the unexpected mixture of high and low tech that had saved the research project. The memory of the wave that carried the solution to her filled out until the kitchen disappeared and she could see and hear the water, tumbling as though it was laughing. And the real, liberated laughing of her friends. Lewis had gone off happy to Manchester.

“This is so going to work,” she said, hearing the force of confidence in her own voice. “Between us we can do it, you know.”

They looked hard at one another, in solidarity, as though they could make the baby while Lewis was away, and then surprise him with it when he came home. For once Rhea let herself be swept up in the enormity of it. The great metal door swung open under her hands. The light splashed out like cold water into the warm dimness of the kitchen,

but when she reached in, Rhea was astounded. The shelves in the refrigerator were completely empty, except for a white cardboard box with IVF INJECTION written across it in red marker: Lewis's writing.

She turned to Amber; her nervous eczema had flushed up.

"The food's in the pantry. It's nice and cool in there. I've done pasta bake." Her face had a closed, worried look that couldn't be down to the pasta bake. Rhea leaned right across the table and lifted the lid on the dish. Brown, grainy shells of hand-made pasta and the stringy fingers of forced asparagus: the vegetarian concoction looked more animalistic than meat. All the time, Amber fretted on. "I thought it might not be right to keep it near to the food. You know, no eating or anything in the lab."

She had been doing this all week and taking the cardboard box upstairs to Lewis for her shot, so that he didn't know the fridge was empty. No wonder she had seemed hesitant.

"Didn't you ask him about the fridge, Amber?"

"Too busy. You know what he's like."

Rhea saw Amber's mouth tightened against unsayable things about Lewis and work.

"You could have phoned me, lovely. I would have told you."

She got the cardboard box out quietly and started to prepare the injection, knowing, all the time, that Amber's ambivalent eyes watched her while she worked, waiting to be reassured.

"It's fine. Put the food back, Amber."

When they were children, it was Rhea who made the lemonade. Amber still had to use the red, plastic spoon but Rhea was older and allowed grown-up cutlery. She took a tea knife from the drawer in the kitchen and used it to hack a lemon in half. Oil spurted out from the waxy pores under the pressure of the blunt sawing and stung the little cracks in her fingers where the skin was dry. Rhea didn't mind. It was nothing compared to what Daddy was suffering with his shaking and his retching.

She dispatched her little sister to the dining room to fetch one of the wine glasses, a big one. The heating was always on in Dad's bedroom and it made him thirsty, he needed a big drink. And then when he had one, sweat sprang up, oily cold on his skin, like the drops on the lemon rind. She rubbed them away, savouring the tang, sharp, fresh,

nothing like Daddy's funny smell. Amber came back with the glass, bearing it importantly, in both hands, her eyes concentrated with effort.

"I didn't drop it, Rhea," she said as she lowered it onto the bench, "I was very careful."

"Good girl," Rhea told her, dribbling juice from the lemon with her bare hands, topping up the glass with water. "It's full now, so I had better carry it up stairs."

The door to the bedroom was closed and with Rhea carrying the glass Amber had to twist the slippery knob and push against the heavy wood panels. She went first into the room and pranced in triumph to where Daddy was sitting, flushed from the heat of his big dressing gown.

"We brought you some lemonade," she announced, rallying a smile to his face.

"Well thank you, my angel. That would be just what I need."

Rhea put the lemonade on the little table that he kept by him and when she turned back Amber was clambering over his chair.

"Are you feeling better today, Daddy?" she asked snuggling into his lap. As Amber dumped down, her dimples so deep you could have hidden anything in them, Rhea saw that her sister's eyes had turned milky, blue but milky, like glacial melt.

They did that whenever she got something that she wanted. They did then, when Rhea held up the syringe and said, "Baby ingredients."

Amber didn't flinch at the sight of the syringe. Rhea brought the needle point to her sister's leg. Amber's skin was going to be a used sort of skin, soon. It was starting to be creased and fragile and it was going to wear out until all those soft-scented creams couldn't hide the damage. But not yet. Rhea brought the needle nearer. "Don't look," she said, but Amber twisted her head to see and her body flinched. A muscle in her thigh, the quadriceps, went into spasm, pushing the needle, and Rhea's hand, away.

Rhea held the leg tighter – it was firmer and stronger than it looked. Everything about Amber was, but held tightly like that, she relaxed and the muscle softened, accepting the intrusion. A lot of people gave themselves their injections but her sister was reluctant. She would trust someone else when she wouldn't trust herself. Amber was watching her clear up. Rhea closed her thoughts down, in case Amber could hear then, but it was already too late.

“Do you think you could push a needle into your own leg?”

“Yes,” Rhea said, but her answer had a sad, disappointed sound. She felt surprised, and not pleased with herself, as though there was a fault line of truth in the *yes*, something that she hadn’t quite realised. She couldn’t imagine her own body softening the way Amber’s could; she felt it would harden, and then shatter suddenly and fragments of her would embed themselves everywhere.

“Do you suppose it will do any good?” Amber asked, in a casual incurious, voice trying to hide the depth of her need for reassurance. “There’s every chance,” Rhea answered.

They were sisters, after all. They ritually exchanged guarantees that everything would be fine. Both of them knowing that they didn’t know whether it would or not; both of them casting spells for the future.

Amber stood over the pasta, with her spoon poised, ready to cut into it and said, “I want a baby so much that I’m frightened of myself.” There was a pause while she grimaced, then, “And I hate my job.”

“But you’re really, really good at it,” Rhea told her, “You always know how to put things; you know how to get people on your side.”

“What you’re saying is, I’ve made a career out of being a manipulative bitch. That’s all PR comes down to.” She took a long drink out of Rhea’s glass. “It doesn’t count if I have yours, does it, Rhea?” She rubbed away the ring that the wet glass had left on the table. “I love this table,” she said. “It’s not just a table, it’s generations of living.” Her fingers probed the grain, claiming its history for herself.

“I don’t think so, Amber,” Rhea told her. “Blokes in warehouses make them look old like that. They whack them with chains.”

“Chains?”

“It’s only a table, I don’t suppose it felt a thing,” Rhea said. “More chic than shock.” Amber laughed uneasily, then her fabricated grin turned into a real smile, but a perplexing one, as if she were signalling in a secret code.

Rhea wasn’t sure whether Amber had been thinking about the table, or herself. The absolute understanding that had always been at the core of their evenings alone, even after Amber’s marriage, hadn’t come back. Sadly, Rhea traced its loss to Dave’s

presence. He'd managed to create more distance between Amber and her than Lewis ever had.

And the hormone injections were making Amber unpredictable; she was so very easily bruised.

Rhea gave up trying to make sense of it and didn't try to talk. Amber could speak at any time. She was speaking then, in her quiet, tender voice that pretended that she would tell you everything. She talked about babies, and how much they mattered, how nothing was as important as a new life.

"Who do you think the baby will look like?"

"Lewis." Amber was sure. "His dark hair will blot out my carrot tops won't it?" Rhea was like Lewis - dark, yet pale - so she realised that the baby might look like her if it was a girl. How Amber would mind!

"We'll have to clone you, and then there'll be another Amber." But there wouldn't be another Amber would there? Because there was no Amber without a Rhea, and, a rueful recognition this, no Rhea either, without a corresponding Amber. Ravelled together they shared a past.

At the idea of cloning, Amber shuddered with the mixture of pleasure and disgust that she specialised in.

*

The mission of the Spring Conference was to be inspirational. It was meant to send the participants back to their laboratories stuffed with enthusiasm and confidence, resolved to do even better. It had achieved all that for Rhea and Lewis long before it started, so Amber had hardly seen them for weeks. She leaned on the balcony railing and looked down into the body of the hall. At the entrance to reception were the two huge banners she had designed, hanging one each side of the door. Every single delegate had to pass between them and every single delegate's attention was caught. People paused to admire them and a queue built up. Once again, she had stopped the traffic.

The enormodrome of a hall was filling up. Everywhere there were groups of people milling around, exchanging greetings. Clusters formed spasmodically around the exhibits, broke up and reformed elsewhere. She scanned the crowd for Rhea or Lewis but

they had disappeared, leaving the young scientists to man their stand. There was a constant shifting. Aspirations, apprehensions, allegiances were all in flux under her gaze.

A formal posse of elder scientists moved together, inspecting the displays systematically, but the young people were volatile. They flitted around, attracted to this group, then that one, taking up and abandoning positions as they went searching out the place where they would fit. How could you not feel sorry for them, jostling in that arena? They worked on temporary contracts that would be up all too soon; they had to hustle for new jobs. Disgust swept over Amber as she realized she was watching people flexing their credentials, having their brains felt up. This was a buyer's market, with the post-docs up for auction.

Katherine was there, gesticulating towards her poster, explaining it, pointing out the photographs, and then offering a handout to some old guy in jeans. He glanced at it dismissively, put it down, and slouched off without bothering to speak. Katherine looked crest-fallen and Amber started down for the exhibition floor to console her. The rebuff of Katherine's efforts stuck in her throat; she felt sick with empathy; shades of loyalty darkened Amber's vision. As she struck out for the stairway, the steps seemed to move too, away from her. The eddying bodies below rose up and fell back. She struggled against the downward pull, but by the time she reached the hall her eyes felt like lead: keeping them open became a colossal, unsustainable effort.

Faintness dissolved Amber's strength. By the entrance there was a row of chairs. She sank down into one, but under her half closed eyes she saw there was someone coming towards her, a grey pin-stripe suit, a rain coat over his arm, alarm in his face. These seats must be for important guests; she shouldn't be sitting on them, but the more she tried to get up the more she sank, further and further down. She was on the floor then, and still sinking. She didn't want to be engulfed; she was fighting against it, but it was too heavy; the weight took her down and she slipped to somewhere underneath.

It was even darker. The darkness sucked her into itself, but she could still hear the delegates; she knew they were still there, somewhere above her. With a last effort she kicked her legs and she surfaced, her head was out, but her eyes wouldn't open yet. Her body stumbled up, by itself.

She was blind. She made for the door and a slit opened under her lids, but she was feeling her way rather than seeing it. Still, there was an impression of bright light outside, spiking the air. She pushed her way towards it, but long before she got there, a determined quiet came and drew her aside.

*

Oh, what is it now, Amber? Rhea thought. Can't she just text? Colleagues were trying to speak to her; visitors were crowding around, trying to attract her attention. *Where is the lecture? Who is on first? Where am I supposed to be?* The extra demand, the conference telephone, grated on her nerves. She gave it a fractious scowl.

"What does she want?" The receptionist followed her stare.

"It's not her on the phone. It was before. She collapsed, we couldn't bring her round. She's been taken to hospital and we couldn't find Lewis or you." Caroline was looking around as though she expected Lewis to appear now. "I thought you must be together somewhere. I told them I would find you."

Amber would have fainted, that was all. It wouldn't be the first time she'd gone in for some stupid diet. Rhea determinedly normalized her feelings, but Glatton came clipping across the floor, Lewis running to keep up behind him.

"He was in the café," Glatton informed Caroline. "I've fastened the doors open and I've got a University van waiting." The revolving doors were pulled aside; a path had been cleared. For them? Rhea moved automatically along it.

"Will you tell everyone, Rhea? Explain what has happened." Lewis was holding her back. "Look after the others at their poster session."

"Lewis, I'm coming to the hospital with you." Lewis had a surprised expression, as though this was the last thing he was expecting, but Glatton was ushering them both along. "She'll want to see the two of you. You need everybody you can get at a time like this."

"Yes, Oh yes, both of us." Relief painted Lewis' face.

They followed, Glatton who broke into a trot and Lewis was straight off after him, stumbling at every step. Glatton paused to let him catch up and then walked alongside, shepherding him past the desk, keeping Lewis on the path to the door. When did he get so thoughtful? Rhea thought. Usually he was an officious pain.

Lewis was on his mobile as they hurried out through the gaping doorway. Now Rhea was carried along in the current of panic - this wasn't just another faint then. "Probably ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome," Lewis was saying. The worst suspicion invaded Rhea's mind. She could see that syringe. She had given Amber her injection the night before, while Lewis was downstairs with the conference guests. The sudden flush: she had dismissed it as Amber's eczema, familiar enough to be insignificant. It may have been the first hint of this. If only she had taken more notice. The excitement of seeing old friends who didn't know what they were going to hear tomorrow had distracted her so that everything else had seemed trivial and the moment had passed, barely noticed, certainly unmentioned.

Glatton was fierce with responsibility. He thrust the overcrowded van out into the traffic and got a blast of horn.

"Don't take any notice," he said. "I'll get you there. Obs and Gynae?" He quizzed himself, running through his personal sat nav, the sort of thing he prided himself on having at his fingertips. Then it all clicked into position. "I'll take you through the delivery entrance."

He switched on the hazard lights and swung right. The traffic was snarled up. The school run was full on and the spine road was choked with four X fours ferrying kids towards the private schools that clustered around the teaching hospital and the University. Every child sulking out of the window, every mother bright with exhaustion, the whole city seemed to be dumped in front of them, especially to block their way.

Rhea rubbed Lewis' arm, but she didn't dare to look at him. The flush of last night's injection kept encroaching, haunting her, so she kept focusing on the scene outside: engines idling, kids stoking themselves up with whines and over-indulgence. She stared with disbelief until the van jolted forward. Godwin had found his gap.

"Conference to ward in twenty minutes."

He was monitoring his own performance, dropping them off at the underground works entrance.

Rhea led the way through the maze of underground corridors, a common short cut for staff because ducking under the heating pipes avoided the crush in Outpatients. There were rumours that colonies of Pharaoh ants lived down there, coddled in the dark and the

warmth. Rhea had always scoffed at the idea, but suddenly it seemed possible that the shadows might be incubating unknown horrors, so that when they reached the crowded hospital, it seemed comfortingly unambiguous and honest. Except for the chaos in Casualty. Electronic monitors did their best at reassurance. *Your waiting time will be approximately forty minutes* scrolled endlessly above their heads and they broke into a trot through the long, anonymous corridors of Cardiology. They should have been familiar, those corridors, she had passed through them countless times, but they were unrecognizable now. The doors, propped open or closed against them, had a quality of belonging somewhere else, belonging to someone else; instead of welcoming, all of it seemed strange and distant.

They got to the ward just as Amber was being wheeled out of Examination. At the sight of her prone on the steel trolley, Lewis moaned and Amber turned her head towards the noise, her eyes wandering around the ceiling. While Rhea stood aside, he went to her. Dr Bonworth came out of her office, wiping glove powder off her hands with a towel. Seeing Lewis bending over Amber, she joined Rhea.

Chapter 7

She was slipping from his grasp. Lewis's hands were chilly and wet when he touched Amber: cold, but wet with the sweat of anxiety. He spoke her name and a small contraction of her pupils convinced him that she had heard him.

He stared into her eyes but he couldn't stop her lids from closing. She kept drifting away: breaking the link between them.

He clung to her hand.

The porter pushed the trolley and Lewis jerked sideways down the long length of the ward, clutching her, bending over her and staring, until they reached an empty bed. The covers were turned back in a neat triangle and he realised that it was prepared, waiting for Amber.

The finality of it hit home; Amber was to be kept here, separate from him: cared for by experts. He released the grip of his gaze and she smiled weakly.

"We'll just get her settled in." The hospital process was unfolding; he felt conscious of having nothing to contribute. Dr Bonworth manoeuvred him back up the ward, towards Rhea, who waited, leaning against the door. Their eyes met, briefly, then Rhea glanced towards Dr Bonworth's office so he knew where he was supposed to go.

Eleanor Bonworth closed her office door and her calm was terrifying. So terrifying that he was paralysed by fear.

"Lewis."

His body bridled at the sound of its own name, and the thought of Amber left in that bed. Why wasn't she doing something?

"What's going on? Where are her notes?"

Amber's file was lying on the table, open. Dr Bonworth closed it and made a decisive little show of laying it in a drawer and slipping the drawer shut. Instead of speaking, she turned towards the viewing window and watched her beds, scanned them with an unhurried efficiency that matched the purposeful hum of the hospital routine. She kept her back to him, checking on Amber being settled into the ward, with an air of contemplation. "We aren't quite sure yet," she said without turning. "It might be completely unrelated to her treatment."

Lewis's lunge forward took him by surprise; he only just stopped himself from grabbing Dr Bonworth and shaking the truth out of her. Experience must have alerted her; she turned to face him, holding his eyes with her professional distance. But Lewis was having none of it; he wanted answers. He trawled desperately through his mind, searching for a clue.

"We have to bear in mind some sort of adverse drug reaction."

Eleanor demurred, her impassive face giving nothing away.

"We're already doing everything we can," she said.

Lewis didn't even hear the list of tests she recited but he was endlessly grateful that there was an established protocol for this sort of thing. Emergency requests were pushed to the front of the queue. Already the sample vials would be moving steadily forward on the hospital's analyser; already, the machines were busy, picking up aliquots of Amber's serum. *Amber Stamfordly* would flash on the monitor and her results would race into the printer. The technicians wouldn't glance twice at it because they had everything under control.

"What do you think?" he asked Dr Bonworth.

"We can't be certain yet. It looks as if there might be some abnormal immune response. I'll know more this afternoon. It might be ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, Lewis." She softened. "It might just be dehydration; she says it was very hot in the conference hall. We're rehydrating her. All her vital signs are stable now. Let us do our job."

Lewis' hands flew upward in surrender. Professionals, firm and absolving, that was what Amber needed. "All right. But be straight with me. You must have something to go on."

There was a pause as Dr Bonworth measured him with her eyes. Then she shifted him aside and got the notes back out of the drawer. Lewis realised that there was no way she needed to remind herself of what was in them. He had the impression of being handled, tactfully and kindly, but then again, he feared that she was playing for time, delaying the moment when she would tell him the truth. He was so strung-up, if she waited long enough, almost anything she said was going to feel like relief.

"Eleanor?"

“I’m not too worried about Amber, we’ve got most things steady, but I’ve got to warn you Lewis, I can’t promise you that we will be able to rely on her ovaries after this.”

Too many words for Lewis to be able to make much sense of them. His attention span had dropped to moments. Through the window he could see Amber, floating untroubled under the influence of the sedatives. Rhea bent over, drawing back the long hair falling across her face and saying something to Amber that made her smile, faintly and from a long way off.

“Do you think I’m bothered about her ovaries? I don’t care. It doesn’t matter, Eleanor. Just make sure that she’s all right.”

Eleanor and Lewis joined Rhea at the bedside. They sat around Amber, her fan swathing each of them in turn in humid air. Dr Bonworth tried to talk to Amber. She asked her, quietly but very deliberately, if she had felt ill the day before. Amber couldn’t answer. Her lips quivered but her eyes closed again before she could say anything.

“Did she complain after her last injection?” Eleanor asked Lewis. He tried to remember, he tried manfully, but last night had disappeared from his memory, eclipsed by the last hour.

“You didn’t give her the injection last night,” he heard Rhea say and as he turned to look at her, he saw Eleanor’s face stiffen with annoyance.

“Perhaps you haven’t been able to keep up to the schedule. She’s meant to have one every night.”

Rhea faced into the draught of tepid air; it swept the hair back from her face so that her skin stood out, strained and dark shadowed under the eyes.

“Lewis was downstairs last night with some conference delegates. I gave it to her.”

He’d been too busy schmoozing Vic to see to Amber: he remembered now. Rhea must have sorted Amber out. Dr Bonworth made a brief note.

“And how was she, Rhea? Any flushing, visual disturbances, blank patches?” Rhea stroked Amber’s arm. It was roughened; eczema was swelling up under her skin and the stroking disturbed a smell, the dainty, pleasant smell of the soya oil that Amber used in her bath. She must have soaked in it that morning.

“Her eczema was flaring up,” Rhea volunteered, “that would have been bothering her.”

Dr Bonworth nodded encouragingly. “We’ll keep an eye on it.”

Amber was sleeping then, lulled by the flurries of the drip into her arm. Let her rest, that was the best thing. “She’ll sleep now, but of course, you could wait if you want to.” Eleanor left them to themselves. Before they went home, the lab techs would ring the test results through. Then, everything would be clearer.

As soon as Eleanor was out of the way, Lewis jumped up and seized Amber’s chart. Pulse: high. BP: lower. Respiratory rate: almost normal now. Temperature: still raised. He checked the dosage information on the drip himself.

“I hope they didn’t make any mistakes labelling those vials,” he said to Rhea.

“Calm down,” she told him, She took his arm and put him on a chair by the bed.

Amber looked calm now; the sedatives had done their job. The sides of the bed had been raised to form a sort of cot, to keep her from falling out, of course, but it had the effect of cutting her off from him, putting her away. He sat watching for what seemed a long time.

Rhea began collecting up her things, her bag, and the brush she’d been using on Amber’s hair.

“Are we going?” Lewis was surprised. But relieved that she thought it was proper for them to leave. She would know the right thing to do; he appreciated that he was hopelessly out of his depth. The ward was oppressive with female concern. Before she left, even formidable old Eleanor Bonworth had melted and dropped her guard. She had embraced Rhea, promising every care. Other women, the patients, scattered condoling support through the curtains, as they made their slow trips from bed to day room. Nurses peered over in sympathy, seeing Lewis and mentally air-brushing him from the scene. It was almost as though the sisterhood wanted Amber to be ill, to swell their numbers.

“They’ll take care of her,” he reassured himself while Rhea took his arm, guided him, out through the door, along the corridor and down the staircase.

“We’re only going down to the canteen for a few minutes, Lewis. Didn’t you see, the nurse was coming to do her obs.” She leaned over and gave him a brief hug, pulling him together as though it was only to be expected that he wasn’t in charge of himself.

The hospital concourse was crowded with visitors, and patients in their night clothes. Their faces had the blankness of people with endless time to fill. Lewis glanced at his watch, guiltily. Too late for his talk. It should have been started by now. His responsibility was to secure their livelihood, his and Amber's too. She couldn't come home from the hospital with their entire future lost. Getting it back on track was a big ask, but he would have to do it.

"Perhaps I should go back, if you can stay," Lewis said as firmly as he could but he could hear that his voice had a stretched out sound, nervous and panicky.

"No you shouldn't," snapped Rhea quickly, too fast for thought, but then she backed off, pillowed his landing with, "We ought to phone, let people know that Amber's all right."

"Need to let Vic know," Lewis agreed. "And organise the group. I ought to see to them, Rhea. You know what they are like."

At the thought of the bereft research team, struggling to hold the line against the competition without his leadership, Lewis was out of the door, joining a huddle of smokers and closet telephoners under the porch. But Lewis's phone calls were different. He didn't need to check what time dinner would be ready or whether he should bring fish and chips. He had serious business in hand. There was so much at stake that he needed more space.

He stood alone in the middle of the lawn with his back to the light, seeing his shadow elongate and blur in the low, winter sun. It looked solitary, extended out on the grass and he pulled himself upright before he opened his phone. He told himself he had a job to do. Amber depended on him, he assured himself, and then there was Rhea's job, his responsibilities there. His mother-in-law's jibe intruded – but if everything went well enough Amber would be able to leave work. He could give her the chance to take care of herself properly. He felt sure of what he needed to do.

By the time the calls were made, it was four o'clock.

"I'll be back by seven," he told Rhea, "to see Eleanor. I'll let everyone know that Amber's all right."

She lifted his hand and palmed something into it, something small and cold that she had taken from her handbag. For a moment he thought of lipstick as she closed his fingers around it.

“It’s the flash drive,” she said, “the back-up copy of your talk. You might need it.”

She had given him permission. With her blessing, Lewis felt vindicated. He didn’t mention his presentation; he nodded in appreciation, incredulous with relief at having been granted his release, but all the time, he wondered if he could cut the talk by fifty percent. The people he really needed to hear it would still be around; they could spare half an hour. He fingered the flash drive in his pocket; its tiny competence encouraged him. He could produce it and just begin to talk, a small apology on his lips, a man under extreme pressure, coping. Alongside this confidence, magnanimity suffused him. Everything could be done with probity. He would stand up and acknowledge Rhea’s part. *She won’t leave Amber*, he imagined saying in a brave, yet tremulous voice. *But they both pressed me to carry on.*

He was conscious of the coming together of a welded whole. He and Rhea were standing close together, he didn’t have to move at all. He kissed her on the cheek, then he kissed her on the lips. The dry brush felt like a kiss to himself, a gift to seal a bargain that would save them all. They were so close in all of this that they were only one person. It felt natural that he and his sister-in-law should find the only comfort that there was.

“You’ll stay with her until I get back, won’t you? Take care of her.” he said as he left.

*

When Rhea went back up to the ward Amber was half awake.

“Thank God you’re here, Rhea. Lewis would only panic.”

She gestured faintly around the room, at the sickly green walls and the iron bed-rails. “He wouldn’t have a clue.” For the next few minutes she kept opening her eyes, fastening them on Rhea, and then they would close again.

It left Rhea alone with her thoughts. She couldn’t stop them from zeroing in on Lewis and the conference. Amber seemed profoundly asleep now; Rhea could have left,

dealt with the conference and been back before she knew it. But that's what bloody Lewis was doing. And then again Amber's eyes might open; checking that Rhea hadn't left her.

Thank God you're here, Rhea. That soft touch, that iron grip that Amber exerted.

Something was happening outside in the corridor. Rhea could hear it, but she couldn't see. A woman it was, gasping. At first, Rhea thought she was having a baby: the panting that she'd seen on television, the cries of pain and triumph. But Eleanor Bonworth's voice cut in.

"In here." Authoritative and firm. "You'll be fine, my dear. Perfectly normal."

A trolley sped past. A woman in a blue silk robe, her head raised from the bed and looking back for Eleanor, who came promptly behind. They were gone in a moment. A door crashed as the trolley barged it out of the way, then thumped as it swung back and it was all quiet again. The ill woman had disappeared, swallowed by the hospital labyrinth, as though nothing had happened. Rhea looked down at her sister, still there, but drained into anonymity by the white, hospital-issue gown. We should bring her own clothes, she thought. Why hadn't bloody Lewis gone home for Amber's clothes? She remembered the kisses he had given her: unmindful, unexpected. She bent forward to the sleeping princess and passed them on to her.

Amber turned in the bed and rubbed at the needle in her hand. As she soothed her, Rhea wondered if the saline in the drip would feel cold and alien in Amber's veins. No, of course not. It was perfectly constituted for comfort. Science had made it compatible with life. No need to speculate about what might happen to Amber. She was in the proper place; all the expertise counted for something, Rhea believed that. So instead, she worried about the conference. It would be noisy there: people talking, their tongues tapping like keyboards and words springing out. Words grouping up in sentences, gathering into ideas. There would be a circle of excitement; the tapping getting faster then slowing as each person reflected, dissecting out the ideas, discerning what it meant to them, what they could take away with them. All that going on without her.

Rhea was alone; Amber, deep in sleep now, was lost to her. Nurses tripped in and out, ring-fencing themselves with taut little smiles that said, *Don't talk to me, I'm very busy*, and at the very edge of her hearing she could hear a telephone ring. She wondered

if it was the results back from the lab. Amber didn't stir; Amber didn't hear it, nothing tugged at her attention as she slept, and drifted through her dreams.

*

A mass of student bodies blocked the way, but Vic's unmistakeable voice was pounding somewhere near by, providing a solid background to the over-excited chatter. The crowd surged towards the bar, shifted, so that the sound came nearer and Lewis could make out the words.

"He's the kind of guy, some of his ideas could do with a re-tread."

He was worn out by the gruelling day, knackered by the effort of simply holding everything together. It occurred to Lewis that they were talking about him. He let the crush of other people's bodies support him because he could scarcely hold himself up and it obliged. More and more people crowded into the space behind him. Music pumped from the loudspeakers; Lewis's anxiety ratcheted up in the noise and the pressing until he felt he couldn't bear it. He began the long struggle back towards the exit.

"Here, Lewis."

Katherine had spotted him and his colleagues eddied closer. They all exuded the nauseating intimacy of alcohol and attention seeking. Lewis felt drenched in a dismal sobriety. He half-expected to repel them, but they were too well-oiled to mind his misery. The racket around them was incessant.

"How's Amber?" Katherine asked. She stood too close and shouted into his ear so that he closed his eyes against the assault and when he opened them, she had noticed. She backed away, offended, and turned to Vic.

"Rhea phoned. I've passed on the news to everyone," he explained in his slow drawl, while the rest of the noise seemed to hang fire until he had spoken. Lewis's actual presence seemed surplus to requirements. He pulled the memory stick from his pocket.

"My talk." He smiled and shrugged.

"No problem," said Vic. "I've taken care of everything. Caroline's found you another slot."

The loss was incalculable. Lewis was going to have to accept a graveyard slot during the final poster session. The international group gathered around Vic were full of sympathy: they wouldn't hear of his worrying himself. As long as his wife was well, that

was what mattered. Plenty of time to catch up on the work later, they assured him as they hurried on to protracted consultations about their own projects.

Excluded from the discussion of the talks he had missed and consigned to the marginal hinterlands of domesticity, Lewis gawped around for a seat, a drink. Vic went to buy the young people beer; it was agreed that Lewis, in his state of family crisis, would have to make do with an orange juice.

As soon as Vic was out of earshot, he questioned his group.

“So, what’s happening?” They looked at one another, too embarrassed to meet his eyes.

“Vic’s been asking about your talk,” Andrew said eventually.

“You haven’t told him anything?”

“No, nothing much, anyhow.” Andrew’s face took on the guarded expression that always accompanied the subject of his next job.

He had said more than he knew, or knew more than he’d said. Lewis couldn’t tell which.

Back at the hospital, he tried to talk about it all to Rhea, but she wouldn’t listen. She didn’t even seem pleased to see him. While he’d been away Eleanor Bonworth had told her that all Amber’s tests had been satisfactory. Ditto her obs. Still she was sleeping, Eleanor had observed. They would keep her a couple of days. She wondered if they had got to the bottom of everything. When Rhea had explained this to Lewis, he turned back to the bed where Amber was watching them.

“Lewis,” she said in surprise. “You’re here.”

“I had to go back to the conference, to get the car.”

“Am I going home then?”

Rhea stood behind the bed, shaking her head at him.

“Not yet, darling. In a day or two. You gave us a fright, you know.”

“Oh.” Amber’s head fell back, disappointed, but she patted the bed, wanting him to sit with her. “The talk, Lewis. Did you sock it to them?”

“I cancelled it. I said I’d do it tomorrow night. If you’re all right, that is.”

The variation on the truth came out smooth and blameless, but it was for the best. It wouldn’t do to let Amber feel she had backed him into a corner.

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Rhea was here with me, weren’t you, Rhe?”

Amber drifted away again, left them watching each other over her bed.

“Is the talk tomorrow Lewis?”

“Yes, during the final poster session.”

Rhea looked at him with resignation. He shrugged it off but she was persistent.

Rhea kept doing the very thing that he didn’t want her to do, picking away at it, so that his disappointment became more and more real. She kept on talking trouble into existence.

“Everyone will have skived off and gone home by then, won’t they?”

“Probably,” said Lewis.

He was quiet as he gave Rhea a lift back down to collect her car and pretended to concentrate on driving, although there was hardly any traffic.

“No one has said much about why it happened,” Rhea told him.

“It’s just one of those things,” was his answer. “They did explain there was a risk.”

“They didn’t say anything about the chances of her still having a baby, after this I mean.”

“Baby?” He had all but forgotten about that now; he had far more important things than babies to worry about.

Chapter 8

“If you could just find me a slot before lunch because Amber’s having a scan this afternoon.”

Caroline couldn’t look at him. Even though he had been nice to her for years while she’d only been a junior with a desk in the corner of the General Admin. Office, the conference administrator felt entitled to ignore him now. Her eyes stayed resolutely on her printout. She had come to work in a plain, black suit, the sort that was called ‘career wear’ in the shops, and her manner had solidified under its influence. Those eyes weren’t looking to find a solution for Lewis Stamfordly; they were calculating whether he was important enough to be worth the trouble. There was a commotion around the posters where Vic and Featly were struggling to re-erect a display that had toppled. Caroline turned to see what was going on.

“There’s really nothing, Lewis. If you’ve got to be up at the hospital perhaps Rhea could do the talk instead.”

She scurried to help with the display, just as Glatton arrived too, and the four of them began to sort it out. Each took a corner of the board. They slotted it neatly into the holders, laughing and looking such a perfectly matched set that Lewis didn’t feel able to join them and after he had stood at the desk alone for a few minutes, he left for the car park, to wait for Rhea.

It was quiet out there. Not many delegates had brought cars. They arrived in groups; fleets of taxis and minibuses had shuttled them right to the entrance of the conference hall. They fell out of the vehicles and hurried up the steps without a glance at Lewis. He should have been the talk of the conference by now.

Everyone he knew was pretending that it didn’t matter, because it so did.

*

Amber’s bag was left in the car boot, so Lewis went back down for it. Rhea went on climbing the stairs alone. She had an uncomfortable feeling about the hospital bag: that she should have packed Amber’s things herself. She wished she’d protected her sister against the risk of Lewis finding the baby jacket hidden in the wardrobe. It wasn’t something he could even begin to understand.

Ward eighteen seemed deserted when she reached it. There was no sign of Eleanor Bonworth, or any of the nurses; all the doors, to the tea room, to the examination room, to the offices that lined the corridor, were closed. No one was on duty at the nurse's station, so she began to look for Amber herself.

The first room she looked in had only one occupant, the woman she had seen the previous night, in the blue silk robe. She was sitting in bed now, watching television, absorbed in the morning chat show and didn't notice Rhea staring. In the next room there were four beds, and four women. Three of them were sitting primly in their sheets, talking lightly while their fingers browsed segments of fruit held in paper napkins. They stopped talking and turned enquiringly towards Rhea. They must have expected a nurse, come to deliver medication, or to take them off for some procedure, because Rhea felt she wasn't someone they wanted to disturb their picnic.

They glanced expectantly at the fourth bed, where a large, elderly woman was lying, gazing blank eyed at the ceiling. She turned her head and began to struggle into a sitting position. Rhea turned away, embarrassed at her intrusion, but the woman called after her, said her name.

"Rhea, don't go."

The words stumbled into Rhea's head like the reawakening of something she had once heard and then forgotten. When she turned back she saw Amber, an Amber forty years older. Her skin had a pharmaceutical drear: too many pain killers, too much pain. Amber's graceful limbs were swollen and heavy. Urbane, elegant Amber had to clamber about the bed to sit up. Her lips fumbled for the phrase that would hold Rhea back. There was revulsion in Rhea, a pulling away from the blighted body. Fear invaded her, the sort of fear that comes from flesh that is too close to your own so that you have to feel its mortality whether you want to or not. She looked down at herself, needing to see that her own body was still the same. She was unwilling even to approach the bed; her hands didn't want to touch this old, bloated sister.

The picnicking ladies abandoned their snacks to watch her. With food raised half way to their mouths, they held their breath.

"Amber, lovely," Rhea said, "I couldn't find you." There was a sigh of release as the watchers subsided back into their convalescence.

Helping her to sit, Rhea felt how Amber's joints were slack, as though her arms and legs were coming loose from her body. Her sister's face struggled to arrange itself into a smile of welcome. The movement stirred the air around her body and the familiar smell of soya oil rolled from the bed and surrounded Rhea to assure her that it was truly Amber inside the sheets.

Amber's hospital gown was twisting; it dragged her back down the bed. She tugged at it, uncomplainingly, but as soon as Lewis turned up she asked him if he had brought her own things.

"We should have thought earlier," Rhea apologised, "Sorry, we've been all over the place."

Amber insisted she had been fine. She hadn't cared what she had worn yesterday, anyway. The sedatives had left her voice lifeless and although Rhea still had to look hard for her sister without the dramatics that normally surrounded her, the same, kind Amber was speaking: the Amber who smiled a grotesque smile and asked how the talk had gone before she said anything about herself.

"Don't you remember that I cancelled it?" said Lewis. "If you're well enough to stay with Rhea, I'll give it this afternoon."

"Oh, you go too, Rhea," Amber said in a dull, thick voice, as though the air was too heavy to breathe. "I'm fine here. I know how long you've been working for it."

Leaping in Lewis's eyes was a fresh blaze of liberation. He looked young suddenly, all unfulfilled promise that could be brought to life by a single touch. Amber looked so ill and in need of love. Guilt-ridden, Rhea wanted to go with him.

"We'll keep an eye on her," chirruped the other inmates. "She'll be fine with us."

Rhea helped Amber to change into her own pyjamas, a silvery grey that dulled her flushed complexion. The neutral colour soothed her swelling and gave some fluidity back to her body, so that by lunch-time Rhea felt that she and Lewis could leave the invalid and go back down to the conference.

There was a steady exodus: not a flood, but a straggle of delegates making their way down the steps, toting overnight bags and, no doubt, various degrees of fulfilled ambitions. A couple of the British teams that Lewis wanted to talk to had been awestruck by the advantage that money and size had given the overseas competition. They had



drunk too much at the conference dinner the night before and had decided on the spur of a muddled moment to get off, straight back into their laboratories. The conference centre had a well-thumbed look about it; the excitement had all gone home with the big names. Lewis and Rhea exchanged grimaces of trepidation before they made themselves go in.

His team was just mooching around.

“Don’t worry,” he told them all, “We’ve got the results. That’s what counts in the end.” The bodies, the separate faces, merged together in a collective wish to believe him. They were concentrating their minds on overlaying their expectations of meteoric success with another, more measured, version. A sigh escaped them and they were smiling bravely.

Rhea stood close as though the group’s disappointment were her concern too. Lewis was conscious of how they always rallied to her call, how much he needed her on his side. If she left a desk after helping someone, an untroubled pair of eyes would follow her. His team murmured as it deflated around him, but it felt like assent.

Lewis delivered his talk into an almost deserted auditorium. His voice fell into a void; what had seemed slick and professional turned on itself and became stale and pedestrian with only the empty seats to absorb it.

He phoned Amber standing under the Conference Centre canopy because the rain was pouring down. Reception was poor under the metal roof; none of this had been in the plan.

“Never mind if half the seats were empty, as long as Vic was there. He’s the only one who really matters,” she told him, the tenuous connection making her words unreliable.

Lewis wasn’t convinced. He drove himself back to the hospital and thought that everything seemed distant - like a film, only one that he wasn’t in.

Sore eyes and low blood glucose were making Lewis feel chaotic. Amber, on the other hand, was lying peacefully, her body composed, and now that the bloating was receding, her limbs had only the plump smoothness that they might have possessed when she was a rosy child. Rhea, when she arrived, thought so too. Perched on the hospital bed, she said that Amber might have red-haired children, because her own hair had been that colour when she was a child.

“Grandfather used to call her Gingernut. He only did it to annoy Mother really. She always said it was auburn, that her Celtic ancestry explained it.” Lewis had been sitting on a chair, pretending to read while Amber slept, until Rhea had arrived. He put his file aside, making way for her.

“But your hair isn’t red.”

“I take after his side of the family.” Rhea laid claim to Amber’s hand, lifting it from the counterpane. “The sensible ones.”

“Her hair’s fair now.” Lewis realised that he had never looked closely before; he’d made do with more of a general impression. He gave a swift, forensic sweep to Amber’s head. “It’s right down to the roots,” he said triumphantly.

“That’s only because she spends so much effort on it. You’ve never even seen her real hair colour, Lewis. She started bleaching it long before she ever met you.”

Rhea usurped his place, next to Amber, and bent, speaking close into her sister’s blank face.

“Do you remember, Amber, when Dad was ill and I looked after you?” Then she turned back to Lewis.

“There were all sorts of things I didn’t know, and no one had time to see to them. I never knew when we needed to have our hair cut and it was always hanging over our eyes.” Rhea brushed her sister’s hair aside, “You do have red hair really don’t you, Amber?” Then she looked into Lewis, right through him challenging him to argue. But he couldn’t hold the look that violated his privacy and turned away so that she laughed, unvanquished, and put out her hand to touch his hair. Lewis used to have a whole lot of hair, cut into a flopping fringe. Amber had arranged for it to be restyled, ready for the conference: reduced to a buzz cut. He often found himself running his hands nervously over his head, searching for his lost hair. He was still trying to get used to the idea. “Like a mole,” Rhea said smoothing her palm over the crop, “I thought it would be bristly. You never expect it to be so soft do you?”

Exhausted and confused Lewis leaned towards her. But Rhea retreated and the moment passed.

“Go home,” she said, “You’re worn out. I’m having a drink with Vic. I’ll see what I can do.”

So he let himself be tidied away, back to Snitter Heugh and an empty bed.

During the few days that Amber had been in hospital the weather turned. A vicious wind snatched wildly at the bushes and rammed torn-off leaves into the gullies and ditches and caught him unprepared. He was knocked off balance. As Lewis's car sped in through the gate the security light switched on and bounced off the flagstones. Looted leaves flew around, forced by the unpredictable gusting so that he imagined everything was being swept away. It was difficult to leave the car and step out into this maelstrom and to hear the baritone clunk of the central locking bar the way back. He scuttled for the shelter of the walls.

After the first glass of whisky, if he thought hard enough, Lewis could believe, briefly, that none of this had happened. Drinking it quickly, he almost managed to convince himself that Amber was still home with him and that he hadn't missed the one opportunity to give his talk. But the second glass of whisky burned the illusion away, leaving him gaping at the truth: his chance had gone and he had blown any hope of rescuing it.

In an act of restitution, he set about torturing himself systematically. He imagined the reproaches of his research group, who had chosen to work with him because he was so good that he never took his eye off the ball. Until now.

Then resentment against Amber's obsession with pregnancy stirred, rumbling from some low place, threatening to erupt. He filled his glass and drank it down to defend himself against the soft smother of motherhood. It seared and he took pleasure in the scouring. Lewis had always dreamed of a girl like Amber, a woman who would keep him awake. Something about her now had made him afraid to go to sleep.

The morning dumped ugly slathers of light around the bedroom. Lewis hadn't drawn the curtains when he went to bed and there was no stopping the day trampling its way in now. He ran his finger around the whisky glass and licked the tacky remains, remembering how the dregs of his fury had turned to fearfulness. He pulled the duvet up closer. It still smelt of Amber, as though she might appear any moment and slip in beside him, warm and fragrant from her bath.

Her hairs were still twined with the embroidery on the pillow, blond, honey and ash colours. Not hers at all it seemed, but put there by the skilled and expensive processes of her hairdresser.

Wrapping the strands around his knuckles, feeling the thin, tight pull of them. Lewis wondered if he could see any red in them, if Rhea was right. There wasn't a trace that he could find. He was glad that Amber had transformed herself into something for him. The womanliness of the artifice gave it the sophistication that had civilized him during the time he had been married to Amber. The realisation that all this had been done for him, constantly and quietly, while he'd been distracted by work, gave him an unexpected, opulent impression of love. Last night's desolation faded.

The phone rang while he was in the shower, the one place in the house where he wouldn't hear it, so all he got was a message.

"Meet me at the hospital with Amber's clean night things, ten o'clock. Put them in a decent bag. You need to see Vic. Eat some breakfast, Lewis."

You need to see Vic. It was a start. Floored hope leapt back to its feet faster than Lewis had believed possible.

The precision of Rhea's directives cut a clear path through the remainder of the fog that was keeping him confused. Eat some breakfast, she had instructed. Lewis was hungry. Having missed out on dinner last night, he was famished: fry-up famished. He trawled through the refrigerator shelves: eggs, mushrooms. That was about it. Amber only did veggie food, but Lewis had been known to sneak a bacon and sausage sandwich from the medical school refectory. The thought of the calorie hit from the forbidden fat, rich with the ancestral flavour of all the bacon and sausages that had ever been fried on the canteen hot plate, cheered him up no end and gave him the resolution to put the health food back in the fridge. He ate a couple of muffins that he found in the pantry and forwarded Amber a little psychic message about the benefits of blueberries.

Nightdresses. Easy. He opened the right drawer straight off. It was pretty empty because he'd already delivered most of Amber's stuff to the hospital and the nightdresses that were left were Amber's best ones. He lifted them carefully, trying to keep them folded the way she had left them but the silk slithered and fell from his hands in an untidy

heap. He grasped them more firmly. The second time they gave in, leaving behind them, at the bottom of the drawer, the necklace he had given his wife.

Wonder filled up Lewis's soul. He could see Amber nestling his gift among her silk lingerie, hoping for something of him to seep into it. For a moment he stood still, stunned by the beauty of her reasoning. Ugly twinges of guilt about the way he'd thought of her last night prodded him into energetic action. Decent bag, Rhea had said. He found something suitable in her wardrobe: a glossy carrier with ribbony handles that looked just right for best nightdresses. The woman in the refectory noticed it and smiled at him as he picked up the bacon and sausage sandwich. Older women invariably found a soft spot for Lewis. He knew they thought him young and vulnerable; he'd enjoyed a good deal of surrogate mothering in his career. He looked down sheepishly at the expensive carrier.

"Someone's lucky," she said. His faith in himself began to return.

The refectory tea was scalding, and the polystyrene cup wasn't going to let it cool down anytime soon. A newspaper left on the next table caught his eye. He could just about read the headlines 'Refugee Crisis in West Africa.' He reached over for it and when he turned back Glatton was taking a seat at his table.

"Another crisis," Stephen said nodding his head towards the paper. Then "How is Amber?"

"I'm just going up to see her now," Lewis answered, "with Rhea." He smirked at Glatton's raised eyebrows, the runty gurn of envy that showed how much he wished that he had Lewis's harem. But Glatton snapped that ingratiating smile off and replaced it with a smirk of his own. "And Vic. I've just left them together in the foyer." Lewis still couldn't drink the scalding tea and there was no time now to eat the sandwich; he had to pick up the fancy carrier and his messenger bag and make an undignified exit, struggling with the encumbrances.

Vic was standing by the stairs, making an island in the flow of bodies that passed around him. Even in the busy foyer he was surrounded by a perma-calm. Nothing seemed to touch his self belief. Behind that big body and that self-possessed lack of tact, Rhea sheltered herself, part of it too, her hand on the stair rail as though she owned it.

"Vic wanted to call on Amber," she said, her voice streaked with warning. "He knows how ill she's been. We've all been worried, haven't we Vic?" She glanced

upwards into Lewis's face, asking him to say, yes. He was giving in, Lewis knew, but it was for Rhea. She was gathering them together, shepherding them up the stairs to the ward where Amber would complete the business. He realised what the warning was: he should just keep quiet and leave this to them.

Vic didn't seem out of place in the women's ward. His frame spilled over the regulation-sized hospital chair but he leaned forward, balanced his forearms across his knees and made himself comfortable, working his mastery on Amber too. She sat up in the bed and began to talk of coming home. With Vic holding her hands, moving them up and down, weighing them against one another, she became all optimism.

"But you take care of yourself," he cautioned. "And you take care of this husband of yours. He's had a fright." He folded her hands together and gave them back to her, as though they had reached a decision between them. "I want you to think about something. Promise me that you'll think about working for yourself." His jowls swung as he turned his head in Lewis's direction. "I've seen those banners she did. Everyone was talking about them. What's a girl like that doing wasting her time in someone else's business?"

A great bolus of fatalism settled itself in Lewis's stomach as he saw the ease with which Vic was able to influence Amber. Then he realised, to his own surprise, that he had no idea where Vic's fatherly advice came from. Did Vic have a wife, a sister, a daughter? He must have had a mother. Vic always arrived from the States surrounded by his entourage of eager, young assistants, unencumbered by any family responsibilities. Lewis had no idea if Vic had any family at all. The thought, the loosening of bonds, the freedom that it involved, startled and then roused him. Like a stent slipped into your artery the idea expanded, cleared the way, and then let too much blood through so that it rushed around his head.

Lewis chauffeured a fragile Amber home through that steady state of wetness where drizzle hangs suspended in the air. But there had been a blizzard of emotional farewells to contend with. Women she would probably never see again had clung around Amber, cloying the air with their schmaltzy wishes. All this time there'd been staccato bursts of gunfire from the television news, but they hadn't noticed. Women and children in Africa were running from huts, straight into the sights of horsemen who hitched rifles aloft with one hand while they hauled on reins with the other. Horses reared and turned as

the atrocious scramble for cover dispersed the victims. Huts blazed. For the moment, the people seemed to have gained cover in the clumps of spindly trees. Lewis stood captive to the horror of it, but all around him the women in the ward went on kissing air.

Lewis looked at Amber, appalled, and she looked back at him, before he had time to look away. The staunch line of his disapproval retreated immediately, but she picked up her case and went ahead, past him, twisting back into the ward for a last goodbye.

The car ran smoothly, responsive to the road. Amber's joints weren't going to feel the slightest jolt from the uneven surfaces of the long commute. That's what money does for you, smoothes the way, Lewis thought. Money earned by Amber's grandfather had once seemed his of right, something to prime the pump of his own success. The Convertible it had bought felt like an extension of his own body so that moving it was the same as moving his arms and legs; the power of the three litre engine funnelled through his fingertips and out onto the road. It only took a change of gear and a hint to the accelerator for him to be launched ahead of himself. Amber was oblivious. The baby train rattled on, regardless of his exhilarations.

Outside the drizzle was getting heavier. Greasy dirt smeared across the windscreen but the automatic wipers took care of it, sweeping the glass clean. The car was powerful and it was heavy. Still, it glided on the slippery surface. The road spun away and straightened out again as a touch on the steering pulled it back, in spite of the wet and the mud. Lewis stole a glance at Amber. She sat calm and unconcerned. Her hand crept forward and covered his knee while they both faced outward, defying the road and the weather to outmanoeuvre them. The compliance of her fingers as he moved to brake assured him. Amber wasn't frightened: she wasn't even looking. Absorbed in her own world, she had handed herself over to him: she for the baby, he for his work. She pressed his knee as if she knew that he had understood and the two of them went on, together and separate.

When he opened the door and ushered Amber inside, a damp smell rolled towards him. Amber's hair was frizzy from the rain. When she went near to the fire it caught the light, making it look red. Rhea's Amber, not his.

"Can you remember when you didn't live here?" he asked her.

"No," she said, "can you?"

Lewis had to be busy. He filled the kettle. This house was Amber's house. It didn't belong to him, even though his name was on the deeds, legally signed and sealed in the lawyer's vogueish office in town. There'd been glass from ceiling to floor in that office, everything out in the open, but when he wandered too near to the window, the five floor drop at his feet had made Lewis giddy. And that was without even thinking about the size of the mortgage or the cost of the renovations.

"I can't remember anything before I met you, not much anyway." Amber was laughing in the low, winning way she often did. "I love this house. It was all that I could think about when I was in the hospital, coming back here, with you."

Amber was tired by the journey. Her joints were still swollen and when he touched her, Lewis could feel the furious inflammation. But Eleanor had shown him the scan of her ovaries. Inside, where it mattered most was calm; erupting follicles were smooth and prophetic of fertility. Thank goodness we didn't admit her to Obstetrics, Eleanor had said. It's not the fertility treatment that's the trouble. It looks like she's had a viral infection. They can seek out your weak spot. Eleanor had gazed at her patient's angry skin, her pulsing joints. Lewis helped Amber to a chair.

"I'm just glad we got you home at all, sweetie. Eleanor said that viral infections can be worse in pregnancy. It's lucky you're not," he told Amber.

Once the words were out Lewis knew that he meant them. A baby was the last thing he wanted. As soon as he realised how true it was, he wished he hadn't said it. To make amends, he went over and touched Amber again, this time tentatively.

"Lucky and not pregnant don't go very well together, do they Lewis?" she said, "It can only be lucky up to a point."

"It doesn't matter to me whether there's a baby or not. I'll love you just the same."

She didn't speak, and knowledge seeped into Lewis. He knew it to mean that without a baby she wouldn't love him just the same. There was a silence while he took this in.

Emotions came thumping about so much faster than reason. The feeling of never being enough was always ready to claw its way upwards. It sprang up so fast that Lewis took a step backwards, as if to escape it.

“There’s just the two of us now,” he said. “Aren’t we happy?”

“Yes, we’re happy,” answered Amber wearily. “You know what I mean.”

There was a moment when Lewis’s feelings hung in the balance, but the weariness of Amber’s voice swayed him. They were both disappointed.

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “It won’t always feel like this.” He lied. He painted a future that he didn’t really believe in: one where the house was full of life and noise. A future that he watched from a distance, too far off to be touched by it.

Chapter 9

It was a given now that everything Lewis did took precedence, because his research was crucial for all of their plans. Amber went to the clinic alone. There was a new nurse eyeing up the accumulating patients. Every now and then she would make a swift, predatory sally into the body of the room and fish one out. The woman would disappear for a while and then return to the waiting pool looking cleansed and brightened. When Amber had woken up in hospital after being so ill, she'd felt light, as though she could defy gravity. In fact, she felt so insubstantial that she could have floated upwards and looked down upon her own body. The idea of leaving herself behind had been a profound and liberating relief: not as if she had died, but as if, suddenly, it was the first time she had ever been truly alive. Was it possible that you could escape the incessant throb of your own blood and the seething of your own joints? Spared a womb, would you be spared this interminable clamouring for a baby? For a time, ignoring her body had felt an unlimited release. She ached for the peace of resignation. Hopelessness and quietude crept seductively close. Maybe, those women the nurse had removed had been rescued from themselves.

The physical pain grinding her joints had subsided once she was at home. First her shoulders, then her hips, knees. It was as though it had been absorbed through her soles into the ground of Snitter Heugh: only the arches of her feet hurt now. She knew the merciful blessing of skies that stayed still and ground that didn't spin away when you stood up too quickly. Often though, her brain ached. In the cold, dark mornings she walked for two miles down to the village. Her mother had woven a wide, long scarf, hazy with the colours of the heather and sky that had been cloaked by the wet weather; Amber wrapped it around herself and trod softly so as not to jar her own fragile equilibrium.

Inside the Post Office there was coffee, served at tables that were still covered by last year's cloths patterned with spring flowers, and cakes with sell-by dates that stretched forward to next spring. The even-tempered voices of other women wove a steady, uncomplicated rhythm, drawing her back to the undemanding friendships of the hospital ward. Each day, Amber bought coffee and sat down to rest before the walk home. The fug of warmth diffused the stabs of her joints to a more bearable discomfort;

caffeine eased her headache and she unwound the scarf whenever she was inside, knowing that she could follow the ritual of cocooning herself again before she left.

At first, the other women glanced her way and then continued the shuttling to and fro of their conversation. Soon enough, they smiled, and within a few days they were tentatively admiring her scarf, fingering the weave of it to admire her mother's artistry. The subtle blend of colours transmuted into the subtle minutiae of Amber's life. She found herself telling her new friends everything: her absolute need for motherhood, the recent move and her isolation, what with Lewis and Rhea so busy. They could have been bored and left her to her problems. They could have shunned the miserable incomer. But that wasn't in their natures; they repaid her with a matching warmth, folding her softly into a communal understanding.

Don't give up hope," they counselled, sure voices cancelling out the cautious prognostications of the fertility experts. "Mostly, you only need to give nature a bit of encouragement," these women assured her. Their confidence in a happy ending was manna to Amber. Their merriment in the trials of delay lightened the bald truths of medical statistics. How old was she? Only thirty six? Some of those women had given birth when they were well into their forties.

Their reassurance penetrated deep into Amber; their patience undid the tension of her sinews and allowed her to be tired. In the afternoons, she drifted in and out of sleep. Thoughts and dreams curled together in a daze of ease and paracetamol. She knew then that hope wasn't going to die in her; it kept on surfacing, sensing warmth and returning to life. Her arms, legs, lungs, womb: they added up to what she was. When she looked in the mirror, she saw a face, but it wasn't her face. It was the face she had before she made herself up in the morning: the face that only Lewis had seen.

She was back in the hospital now, but this was Outpatients; no ties could survive in the anonymous coming and going of strangers.

The nurse was still watching. Her face wasn't pretty, her mouth was crooked, but it was one of those arresting puzzles that you can't take your eyes off. She was right not to use make up. You shouldn't hide a face like that; you had to let it stand up for itself. This woman was prepared to stand in the clinic doorway, half in and half out, without

making any effort to disguise her interest in Amber. It was uncomfortable to be studied so thoroughly, so Amber watched back. The nurse didn't look away.

"Mrs Stamfordly, isn't it?"

Her voice was husky. Like her face it didn't ask for any allowances to be made. You could buy into that brown, northern brogue or you could walk away and leave it alone: she wasn't going to change it to suit your ears. This nurse had a brave smile. It hinted of something unhappy in her background, the determination to be cheerful in the face of some unknown hurt. Intrigued, Amber followed her into a small consulting room.

"Dr Bonworth has asked me to have a few words with you before she sees you."

A half smile came onto her paradox of a face: the satisfaction of being trusted by the consultant. Amber visualised the two of them together, studying her case. They must have been collaborating to do their best for her. Professionals like them could read between the lines of the notes. It took a long time to be that astute, but this woman wasn't young: not old either. Perhaps she had children herself. Or perhaps she knew what it was not to have them.

"I'm Rachel Fenbridgeter. I'm running a trial for a new infertility treatment."

"Yes," Amber said, "I'll sign up for it."

"Oh it's not definite, you know." Consternation made the nurse's face reticent. A shuffle of the papers on her clipboard was meant to disguise her loss of direction. "It's certainly encouraging to have such an expression of confidence, but you should understand that this is just a preliminary discussion?" Amber nodded wisely. She could go along with all the palaver of medical ethics if it got her a baby. Recovering from a virus during IVF treatment, she was hardly an ideal candidate for a new drug trial. The nurse was suitably mollified. "We've all noticed the positive way that you have responded to your treatments. Dr Bonworth will explain your test results to you. This new fertility drug is very gentle, but if she thinks there's any question of risk to your own health, we wouldn't go ahead."

"But gentle," Amber pleaded. "It could be perfect for me." Nurse Fenbridgeter still shook her head. She belonged in a world like Lewis and Rhea, where what counted were test results, measurable things. She couldn't contemplate the intangible, the PR spin

that could put you on the right, or the wrong, side of acceptable. She hadn't been outmanoeuvred by a professional before.

"It might have just been an allergic thing," Amber offered. "We had just moved house you know. I've always been prone. You can't imagine the dust."

But how wrong Amber was. The nurse most certainly could. She had only recently endured the most awful move herself. In fact the only thing she couldn't imagine was how some people could leave their home in such a state. Amber nodded, the consolatory glow of connection seeping into her face and finding its complement in Nurse Fenbridgeter's intriguing features. A shaft of sunlight cast the shadow of the sash windows along the faded wood of the desk.

Sunday School. That glow. The shadows on the whitewashed wall came from the taper that Amber guarded, very carefully, in the mottled brass holder that was given to each girl on her birthday. The smoke curled upwards towards the vaulted roof and the child's hand, steadied by the weight of responsibility, pressed the flame against the black wicks of the big altar candles, melting away yesterday's hardened wax until they spurted into today's life: eight of them, one for each of her eight years. She'd looked back to admire the path of light she had left behind her.

"That's your goodness," her mother had told her and Amber had felt herself a shining angel. I'll never be naughty again, she had secretly promised, clasping the taper in rapture. Virtue had beamed out from her.

"Of course, I've changed onto a totally organic diet. And I do Tai Chi every night before I go to bed."

The nurse shook her head in an amazement of appreciation and sadness. "If only all our patients were so responsible." She looked as though she might be going to tell some lurid tales about the behaviour of other, less responsible, would-be-mothers, but she thought better of it. Even silent, her mouth wasn't quiet. It assured Amber, I won't burden you with this.

It was settled then. Nurse Fenbridgeter would refer the application to Eleanor, with her recommendation.

Now, at the thought of the nurse's face, the quick suggestiveness of her voice, hope gained another foothold. *We've all noticed*, she had said. Light-headedness

vouchsafed Amber a clarity that wouldn't let her give up. She could see sharply, as though everything had been washed, that Vic was right. She should work for herself, but not in PR. Better to shed the whole grimy business, quit putting a decent gloss on the unacceptable, and give herself a fresh start, a final, pure effort to give pregnancy a chance. Before she left, Rachel placed a light hand on her arm.

"It would be good if we could make some progress on your anaemia."

Amber's new friends from the Post Office café were all very willing to help on this one.

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"You don't need to be a vegetarian to support animal welfare," Esmé assured her. "Look at our farm." Amber stopped to catch her breath and, at the same time, marvel at her new boots: thick-soled, walking boots that had let her climb for two solid hours without chaffing.

Esmé's Labradors panted around her feet hankering to go on, but up there on the hillside, cold snatched the breath from your mouth and Amber needed her inhaler. The moorland sheep stood, leaning solidly into the wind that blew with an unremitting ferocity. But stupid, stoical sheep had held their ground like that for centuries, out-facing the weather to tramp their narrow tracks between the patches of short, spare grass. Amber turned her own face to the wind and untangled the hair from her eyes.

As they climbed down to the valley, Esmé called the dogs close to her saying, "These are new flocks. The old hefted sheep had to be killed in the foot and mouth outbreak. This lot don't know their way about yet. If they get scattered, they won't be able to find their own way home."

The incomer sheep picked their way across the springy grass. Stone scree spread down the slopes and made walking difficult. Amber, Esmé and the two dogs had to climb upwards again to avoid it.

"Foot and mouth," repeated Amber, "was it that bad?" For once Esmé was reluctant to talk.

"That was when these two got so fat." She rubbed the backs of Dina and Dee Dee, scratching deeply down through their coats so that her fingers disappeared into the furze of sandy hair. "We hardly ever went out, in case we spread it around. You just felt guilty

all the time, but there was nothing you could do.” The dogs were rubbing against her legs now, comforting her. “We had to go to the supermarket one day and when we came back, just as we came across the bridge, they started killing the Slatley pigs. They were screaming so loud you couldn’t get it out of your head.” She gazed into the valley as though the sound was still caught in it somehow, snagged among the cotton grass and the tussocks of heather.

But anaemic Amber had to build herself up if she was going to become pregnant; she would have to eat meat. She lifted a ham from the oven, vulgar and coarse with the huge knuckle bone protruding from its hood of fat and as she carried it, the lump of flesh slithered about as though it was trying to escape. Its surface was covered by eruptions: tiny, vicious detonations all over it, where fat and water and heat clashed head on. It wobbled greasily and threatened to fall. The quick movements that she had to make to keep it steady juddered through her. She realised that she could hear the sounds of her own body. The joints of her fingers grated and creaked. There was a clamour of blood in her veins and the accelerating thump of her heart. The edge of the plate was slimy and it slipped forward from her fingers, clattering onto the table and making Amber jump back in alarm.

There was a huge flood of relief. Perhaps the plate was broken and the joint would be ruined, full of shards of glass. But no, a prod and a stirring with the fork showed that both the plate and the ham had survived unscathed.

The smell rose stronger, carried by the heat. The whole kitchen was swirling with the sweet saltiness.

“You sit down.” Rhea watched her hesitate. “I’ll see to that.”

Fat glistened apart under the cut of the knife; the soft pink meat came into view. Then there was Rhea, unconcerned, unfazable Rhea flipping it from knife to plate, passing it across, speaking as though pushing dead animals into your mouth was the most natural thing in the world.

“Quick. Straight down, and don’t even think about it.”

But Amber recoiled from the tiny puddle of fat and the flopping flesh.

Rhea understood immediately how difficult fat was for her, almost as though she had the same feeling herself. The fat was the worst part. If you’d been a vegetarian for

ten years you just couldn't eat fat, even if you wanted to. The blubber was cut away and swept from the plate without a word. Amber raised the softly striated muscle to her lips. She touched it to her teeth, her tongue, and immediately, she was invaded by that sweet saltiness; she ached to take it into her. She couldn't resist its clutch; she wanted it. The Slatley pigs screamed at her across the valley, betrayed. In a scald of panic she threw the plate onto the table and backed away.

"You don't have to if you don't want to." Rhea's arm was round her shoulder, hiding the sight of the corruption. "Veggies do have babies, you know."

"Oh Rhea, I do want to. I want to do everything possible. But I'm frightened. I know it's the right thing to do but it's the wrong thing too."

"You could just keep taking the iron tablets."

There was a gurgling spurt of steam from the joint as though it had an opinion on that. A fine net of humidity trapped them together, Amber and the meat. The hot smell of salt and sugar blocked out the stench of the lab. The irresistible lures in the ham snared her; her body demanded she do it.

"No. I want to eat it."

"Well, then." Rhea teased the ham apart with her fingers and buttered two tiny squares of a loaf. Four minute, sacrificial shreds of meat were placed deep in the heart of the floury bread.

"Just one bite. That's quite enough to start with."

Amber looked at the proffered morsel. It was tiny, how could it hurt anyone? She saw that Rhea's hand was still, steady. It reminded her of something, the way that Rhea held things out, as if she didn't mind whether you took them or not.

On the day that Amber started school, the new infants had been led in single file through a long, dark corridor, and then ejected from a door into the playground. She'd turned back to see the other children behind her popping out into the sunshine, one by one, like peas from a pod, and each one alone. She'd thought she was going to cry, but then she saw Rhea leaning on the gate. She was talking to her friends and without ever looking, held out her hand. How good it had felt to be the only new starter with someone waiting for them.

It was such a tiny thing, a little bread, a little butter, the infinitesimal scrap of something else. Rhea made things easy for her. Amber kept her eyes on her sister and didn't look at the sandwich. Rhea looked back, smiling very lightly, not saying yes, not saying no. Amber's fingers made the decision for her. While she looked away, they picked up the food and put it into her mouth. A glorious burst of flavour, a longing fulfilled, a deep relief stretching into her very bones. She closed her eyes and when she opened them again, the kitchen felt tiny. Amber had ballooned huge and powerful to fill the space, as amoral as nature itself.

Rhea held the plate of ham, examined it from every angle. Satisfied by her inspection, she began carving, handling the thin, long steel comfortably, stroking at the ham so that it separated and fell away at her touch. Amber felt her own flesh, solid and unyielding. Was cooking all it took to make that difference, to take the blood out of something? Rhea spread the slices across the plate.

"Well done," she said. "Whatever it takes."

Yes, thought Amber, I'm having a baby, whatever it takes. Hunger grew in her; her own flesh demanded more. She measured herself against Rhea, never flinching, doing whatever it took for as long as Amber could remember. The meat was cooling, Rhea was ahead of her, already organising the next move.

"You could pack it up and freeze it. Just try a little bit whenever you feel like it."

Amber stood in awe of Rhea's ability to reduce hot flesh to neutralised packages in cold storage.

*

In the evenings, Lewis sat with Rhea in his office, in the tiny realm created by the light box, like a miniature cinema. They looked at negative photographs of gel run outs, comparing them one to another until they could be certain where they differed and where they were exactly the same. No mother could have looked at her baby more carefully, at the tiniest details of its anatomy, the smallest creases on its wrists or its flailing little feet. As long as they sat still, they worked in a gloaming half-darkness, but as soon as either of them stirred, the movement-sensitive lights would bolt on and they would be shocked back into immobility, like a pair of convicts caught in a search beam.

There was no choice about working so late. Once Amber's illness had interrupted their schedule, they had to make up the loss.

They needed Vic's funding; there wasn't any other way in sight. The increase in stem cell yield lay pessimistic on the desk between them, a few percent rise at each culture step. Steady, but slow. Nothing like fast enough to impress the money. Lewis felt the inexorable slide of his ambitions. He turned to Rhea for comfort, but there wasn't much to be had. A red smear of blepharitis rimmed her eyes. Exhaustion had meant she couldn't fight off the infection. Lewis's own eyes itched with contrition. She needed to go to the doctor but she had been too busy, producing these inadequate little numbers. Antibiotics might clear it up but then again, realistically, they might not. Blephritis was one of those things you couldn't shake off. Like a worry that you couldn't get out of your head, it lurked and came back at you whenever you were tired.

The figures turned round in his head and came back on themselves. It didn't matter which way he looked at them, they weren't good enough. The American had been back in the country for a week, expecting an up-date. A ten percent rise in purity would probably be a deal clincher. Hidden behind a password on her computer, Rhea had a spreadsheet that predicted the financial cost of each percentage point rise they would gain by just keeping plugging away as they were. It was much too much. Just the salary bill was astronomical. Katherine, Andrew, Joe and Fazil each came with a price tag attached to them.

Lewis hated the way Vic asked Rhea about their work rather than approaching him. The fat American would spread himself across her desk in front of everyone, crease up the folds of his loose face and then whisper his queries confidentially, just between the two of them. That attracted attention; the rest of the team would glance significantly at one another, then across to Lewis. He rubbed his eyes.

"Are you going to show Vic the spreadsheet?"

"Only if he asks."

There was a hint of betrayal there. She might have said, no, not yet.

There was a scuttle in the corridor; the lab doors burst apart to let in Glatton. One by one the lights jerked on, tipped off by his approach.

His cocky walk, grated on Lewis's inflamed neuroses. If someone like him had brokered some deal with Vic and Featly, that's exactly how he'd walk. He wouldn't come out and tell you; he'd let you find out by degrees. More fun that way. The signing-in list lay open on the porter's lodge every evening. Lewis was going to check it as he left, to find out who else had worked late.

"I thought I might find you two here."

Rhea closed the results file.

"Well, it's not exactly rocket science is it, Stephen? This is where we work."

He nodded grudgingly, but there was a smear of un-conviction in the gesture, as though he wasn't prepared to concede anything. "I've been hard at it myself. I just wondered if Amber would let you out for a drink before you head home." There was silence. Glatton broke it himself. "Rhea?" he asked.

"Sorry, Stephen, we're absolutely slaved." She stood up and piled file on file.

"Another time."

Glatton shrugged and turned his back.

In the uneasy quiet that he left behind the lamps flickered out again, so there was only the gleam of the light box and beyond it darkness. For a moment it seemed that the light was too light and the dark was too dark. They didn't mingle anywhere. Gradually Lewis's eyes adjusted; shades of grey began to appear and centrifuges, fridges, freezers and incubators took their places around him. He laughed nervously.

"Does Amber still let you go for a drink, after last time?" Rhea was nervous too.

"Yes, but it's me, isn't it? I can't trust myself."

The lab settled and sighed around them. Rhea sat next to him and played with the results sheet.

"It's just as well that you've got us to keep you right then." She patted his arm, but it was sisterly. In the half light he could see her skin, so like his. His right hand and her left, one each side of the printout. They might have had a single pair between them.

"Amber," Rhea said, "is she alright?"

"Yes. No." Lewis's voice faded with doubt. "I mean she's fine, but she's still a bit shaky. She takes all these long walks with her friends. She's going on about double

glazing. Honestly, we can't afford it, but she says she'll catch pneumonia from the draughts in that house."

"It's her asthma. She's scared, Lewis. We've had some bad times with it. You've got no idea. Let her have her double glazing. It'll keep her happy."

Rhea was looking at the figures again.

"We won't say anything to Vic?"

"Not yet." She sighed. "Something will turn up."

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Amber kept peering out of the windows at the distant landscape because the inside of Snitter Heugh brimmed with absence. It was empty without Lewis and Rhea but still it cost money. Even the bare trees and the grey skyline, often teasing her by appearing and disappearing through the mist, were better company than the pile of invoices on the table. Unpaid bills had such a look of reproach; they were threatening to escape their interment in the box file and spread themselves across the kitchen. She laid them on the table, face-up, and chose one. It needed only three hundred pounds to pay it off and there was three hundred pounds, tucked into a drawer in the bedroom, in case she couldn't get to the bank. She brought the roll down to pay the builders, fingering a sum of money that would have been trivial to her when she was at work. Her credit card wasn't acceptable here; there was a reality about banknotes, passed from hand to hand, that suited the local economy, but she had expected the money to feel heavier than it actually did.

There couldn't have been much work in the country, because she had no trouble finding someone to install double glazing, although she preferred to believe that it was because the neighbours had taken to her. Belonging had become the leitmotif of her existence and paying up was a non-negotiable requirement in village life. Likewise, colossally expensive double glazing. Mullioned windows didn't come cheap, but then the local planning regulations were exceptionally strict on character preservation. She guessed it was a ploy to support the local economy.

"Luckily," Sarah Pindon had told her, "our Simon and Martin do all the big houses around here. But I'm sure they'll see to yours, if I ask them."

Simon and Martin were fantastic company. Their good humour was enough to scare draughts and anxieties away. They'd just finished their first coffee of the day when the scaffolders turned up. Amber opened the kitchen door to see how many more cups were needed but Simon was standing on the step, blocking her view.

"There you go." Under the cover of his clipboard he thrust two empty mugs into her hands, keeping a watchful eye on the men unloading the lorry. "We'll have our next cup after they've gone." There was a definite hardening of his features as an incline of his head indicated the scaffolders. They scowled back, angling their bundles of long grey poles, to get a better look at Amber. Simon leaned forward, putting himself in their line of sight. "They come from Flirnton way," he told her. "We have to hire their scaffolding, but we have as little to do with them as we can." A satisfied grin invaded his face as Amber's smile fled.

"They've always been bandits over there. Rustle your cattle before they'd look at you." He paused for dramatic effect, like Simon had told this story before, Amber guessed. "Time was," he said, "that lot came over the hills and burned everything we had." The bandit scaffolders looked willing enough to Amber. They were heaving poles and clamps from the lorry, a bit carelessly, she thought, dropping them from a height, rather than lifting them down and laying them in order on the ground, the way that Simon would have done. Still, that didn't make them arsonists. Martin popped up behind Simon, wanting his part in the story.

"They burned the Abbey school down once." He added gleefully, "with all the kids locked in it."

"You were mitching that day then," Amber laughed and Simon joined her.

"All a long time ago, nearly a thousand years, but we don't forget, do we? It pays to know who your friends are."

So it was true. One day, back in the twelfth century, – was it a sunny day, Amber wondered, or rainy and dark? – men had come across the hill tops from Flirnton and burned down the school with all the children locked in it. She glanced away towards the horizon. It was clear and bright; you would see anything that moved. Had anyone been watching and thought nothing of their first glimpse of the marauders? They could have mistaken them for straying sheep, or a trick of the light. The memory of the unexpected

hardening of Simon's features at the sight of the Flirnton scaffolders leapt up at her. Was that how they had looked, just as they realised that it was a raiding party? Martin and Simon had roots in this place, roots that went deep, down further than she could imagine.

"We'll have some more coffee when they're gone." The cups clinked in her fingers as she nodded. Simon and Martin stood between her and the strangers.

She folded the three hundred pounds. The notes were new, stiff and unused to being handled. It was difficult to stop them from springing the envelope open. Amber had to press firmly to seal it. Simon didn't bother to count the cash when she passed it over to him. He glanced downwards and she knew that he had an instinctive sense of its value. She saw him peel off some notes and pass them across to the scaffolding men as they climbed back up into the lorry and left, without even so much as a cup of coffee in their bellies.

The scaffolding shell clung flimsily to the stone walls of Snitter Heugh: the poles reedy and insubstantial. Simon and Martin whistled as they tore the wrappings from the new window frames and folded the waste into the back of the van.

It was only a little decision, nothing earth shattering like stem cell research, but she didn't want to tell Lewis or Rhea. But then again, she couldn't exactly keep it a secret; she couldn't keep slipping out to the outhouse under the cover of darkness, to make paper as though it was a criminal activity. Though it might easily be criminal, she supposed, under some regime that wanted to suppress news, or what about monopolies. Not everyone might be allowed to make paper. She didn't want their bored exchange of raised eyebrows, their 'What is she up to now?' expressions. There was more to her new venture than she was going to tell them. A business and a self-sufficient refuge, she thought. She would turn Snitter Heugh into a sanctuary for her family. Some day Lewis and Rhea would be grateful for the safety of her walls.

Chapter 10

One of the gel tanks was fizzling out of action with an electrical fault.

“It took me three months to grow these cells,” Joe protested, “after I had all that trouble with the dishwasher, and I’ve already boiled my samples.”

“So have I,” snapped Andrew and brandished a beaker full of thin tubes, already tagged up for loading and deteriorating every second of the delay. He glowered. He squatted down, rummaging through the cupboard for a spare set of leads, but he didn’t have any luck so he glared upwards, red-faced for lack of an answer.

Only Rhea had a personal set of equipment. That was the difference between staff and the temporary employees, who could be disposed of as soon as the grant money ran out. Of all the post-docs, Andrew was the one most at risk: thirty-four, getting too expensive to be attractive to another research team, and with only another couple of months left on his project grant. At odd moments, Rhea caught the others watching him with a neurotic fascination, gauging their chances of sharing his fate. If they didn’t get more money Andrew was going to be just another post-doc with his brilliant future behind him. He was in a constant turmoil; it was worry turning him bolshie, not tank leads. At this rate, they’d be glad to see him leave.

She gazed across to the Business School, at the window that had once been Dave’s office. The blind was always pulled down now, like a closed eye, so that she had no idea who worked there, but space was in short supply and she knew that it wouldn’t have taken long for him to be replaced. Someone else would be sitting in Dave’s seat by now, dishing the dirt on the world economy. But without Vic, there’d be no hope of replacing anyone in the lab.

Andrew and Joe were still arguing over the one working tank.

“I’m almost finished,” she called out, and Andrew stopped his rummaging. The effort of research was so disproportionate to the returns. Everyone was sick of it. The weather was dirty and the windows were crusted up, blocking off the outside world. They had spent so long cloistered together that they had forgotten that the outside world existed. Or if it did, it was a watered-down version of the life they lived together. So much so that, if the phone rang, it felt like an intrusion.

Lewis came from his office and, immediately, all the attention was on him.

“I’m having lunch with Vic,” he called over to her, “hold the fort.”

He was out of the door before anyone could question him.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Katherine asked.

Rhea shrugged. Andrew came over to commandeer her electrophoresis tank. He’d boiled his samples with mercaptoethanol to break the links within the proteins and the stench of sulphide followed him through the room. Grim-faced, he layered the preps onto the gel. Andrew had good hands; they were like her mother’s, dextrous and steady. But Andrew wasn’t planning to watch his life go by in cloistered rooms. He was already agitating to get out of the lab and move on to higher things. His samples dripped accurately from his syringe and into their wells. Glycerol made them viscous so that they didn’t mix with the electrode buffer. They fell in a thin, curling stream: purple, sinuous, implacable.

Her friends took it for granted that it was a lie when Rhea said she didn’t know if Lewis had got the money. She didn’t blame them. All the little talks she’d had with Vic while Lewis glared out from his office: how could she not know? But now the serious business was in hand, Lewis was the boss. It would be his name on any contract they got. She hadn’t been prepared for the inexorable unfurling of this loneliness, after the security of shared anxiety. Until Lewis came back she had no idea what would happen - and when he did, if they had been lucky, she guessed that the story would be that he had pulled it off alone. *All those tricky negotiations*, Lewis would say, misremembering perfectly who had brought Vic on board in the first place.

The afternoon dragged on. Rhea looked out of the window and saw Lewis coming back to the department alone. But he didn’t come in. Stephen Glatton bounced down the steps and Lewis swerved and veered off, heading towards the staff club. He wasn’t smiling. It’s a good sign, she thought. If Lewis had failed he would be grinning, putting a brave face on it. Glatton hurried towards the Vice Chancellor’s office and Rhea watched the gap between the two men widen. Lewis already knew the outcome; Stephen was going to find out.

Lewis didn't even glance up towards the lab. She felt an overwhelming sense of exclusion. Now she would have to wait like everyone else until Featly announced the winner of the funding.

Andrew and Joe were setting up assays at opposite ends of the bench. Resentment fizzled around the laboratory, every bit as likely to cause a short as the faulty gel tank.

In the library, Featly delivered his speech like a US politician, talking in a fast, flat monotone as though he had a great deal of very important, but obvious, stuff to get through. The younger members of the department took their cue from him and adopted positions of engaged and pro-active listening, leaning forward in their seats with their hands clasped before them on the tabletop: the Washington intern stance. Only Vic, the solitary, genuine, American citizen was sanguine enough to send out a message of disengagement from the entire process. He leaned back in his chair, amused, his eyes fixed on the distance. Lewis angled his head to follow Vic's gaze and guessed that he was reading the notice the cleaner had stuck to the blind. *Please do not leave the window open, it read. The pigeons fly in and crap on everything.*

"A department like ours, always fully engaged in the quest for continuing development, both here and in complementary laboratories of international renown, is proud to have provided the essential and sophisticated infrastructure for some groundbreaking work." Featly raced on, the backed-up pressure of the long list of non-existent urgent appointments hurrying the words out of his mouth.

When he'd first arrived in the University, and sought it out, Lewis had imagined the old library to be a hushed, oak-panelled sanctum. The University's state-of-the-art central library was stocked with electronic journals, computer stations and a coffee shop, with all its commotion and noise, so Featly had kept the old departmental library: a seedy room with one long, battered table. Lewis rarely went in there, but right at that moment, in the stale air, he felt how he had lost his taste for the ancient and hallowed and wanted to leave the burden of it all behind. Novelty beguiled him. Glee twitched in the corners of his mouth.

His colleagues were intent and earnest; except for Glatton, they still harboured hopes that there might be something in this for them. Lewis tried to look hopeful too, as Featly's voice lifted to its climax.

“Team effort, inspiration, leadership and insight by workers who have relentlessly pursued their goals, has led to further recognition for members of our department.”

There was a shifting around the table, then the tense stillness of anticipation as everyone understood that the announcement was drawing near.

“We must thank Lewis for achieving this recognition for the University, and its growing reputation for first class research,” Featly concluded.

Stranded in a disbelieving silence, he went on to congratulate Lewis on having been awarded half a million pounds of Vic’s start-up funding and refurbished lab space in the new Science Park. Lewis composed his response: gazed modestly around, angling for support, and had to make do with lukewarm congratulations.

Half a million pounds, five hundred thousand. It had a modish sound to it. Not a huge amount, but his post docs were safe, and that was hard for his colleagues to accommodate. Their own teams were going to look enviously at Lewis’s now and wish they’d been one of his. And the facility at the new Science Park was a roll-over bonus. His people would be freer there, away from the constant surveillance of the departmental busybodies.

Featly’s hand was straying towards his stomach, rubbing it tentatively. It’s too much cheese, Lewis thought, vaguely queasy from the lunchtime moussaka. His colleagues were all leaving without him. He started after them, but Featly stopped him.

“There’s a drink in it for you, Lewis.”

Lewis was ushered away in the opposite direction and the solid bulk of Vic blocked his view of his disappearing friends as he joined his new collaborators.

As they crossed the uneven pavois for the congratulatory drink in the staff club, he knew that he would be visible from the lab. No longer just another aspirant, he grasped at his rightful place in the system and didn’t look up for the approbation of his team.

Lewis had always hoped to be alone when the moment came, the moment of revelation that he was a true member of the establishment. He had imagined the feeling, the taking of a modest place in the history of scientific research: the grand isolation that this calling would involve. But here he was, pressing through a tide of undergraduates on

their way to afternoon lectures. It was better than he had ever dreamed, the anonymous crowd parting around him.

But seeing his team again was like unwrapping a longed-for surprise: layers and complicated layers of crackling paper. Andrew, Joe, Fazil, Katherine. Then, at the heart of it, Rhea. The laboratory was a public arena; this was a private celebration, so they crushed together in Lewis's office. For once, he didn't even try to act cool.

"It's all ours," he told them, "Five hundred fucking thousand," while they huddled, shoulder to shoulder, arms pressed together in the confined space.

Katherine hugged Andrew, who hugged Rhea and they all shuffled awkwardly until they laughed and had just one, wholehearted, group hug. It wasn't even embarrassing; they just melded into one happy clutch. Katherine dabbed a kiss at his cheek; Rhea bent to his desk drawer. The long curve of her back coiled in front of his eyes as she stood up with a bottle of champagne. When she raised it above her head, he felt the muscles of her arm tighten against the effort, as though they were his own muscles.

"Vic brought it up while you were still with Featly," she said and for a sudden, disorienting moment, the clamour of success reverberated throughout Lewis's world. Even his celebration had been anticipated, organised as though he had directed it without ever knowing. He couldn't remember feeling like this before; finally he had surpassed his own self.

They drank the warm champagne there in the office, slugged carelessly from disposable cups. It was fragrant and flowery in the heat and if the beakers had a lingering aftertaste of plastic, it only added piquancy to the thrill. Curly sprays of bubbles hung suspended in the atmosphere and got breathed in, along with one another's exhaled air. This was their moment. The office windows steamed up, breath on glass, so that no one could see in, and they couldn't see out. They didn't need to: the whole world was enclosed in that tiny room.

In the huddle, Lewis put an arm across Rhea's shoulders and leaned on her. For once they weren't competing; he felt the rise of her body to support him and they rocked slightly, so that she bumped against Joe, who put his arm around her too. Andrew was crushed, he opened the door and they all tipped out into the laboratory.

“Work?” It was Andrew, closest to the edge.

“Good God, no.” Lewis wanted to hold on to this moment, not to have it swallowed up by the effort of routine. “Get real. Get to the bar.”

Andrew shook his hand. Lewis knew it wasn’t surrender, just a burying of the animosity, an understanding that Andrew’s job was safe; he’d been brought back home, at least for the moment.

The move to the bar left Lewis behind.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Rhea, too, lingered. “It’ll never be this good again,” Lewis said thoughtfully.

“Yes it will. It will always be like this from now on.”

She was watching him, complicated and too knowing. “You should phone Amber.”

At the door everyone turned to wave. They would have heard Rhea’s instruction because the bare surfaces in the laboratory made sure that voices carried as crisp, unadulterated sound. They sent understanding smiles, because he couldn’t come with them, shouldn’t leave Amber alone. But the circle was such a perfect shape, Lewis couldn’t bear to open it up and expose a gap. Without Rhea there, he’d have been off, straight into the bar, getting beaten up by beer and noise all the way to oblivion. With his wife’s sister at his side, he couldn’t go. He felt a sudden anger, and longing for a simpler time, before marriage had hemmed him in. He looked at Rhea, wanting her to insist they all celebrate together.

“I’ll wait until I get home,” he told her. “Face to face, I’ll tell Amber everything.” He watched Rhea after he said it, and he wasn’t sure whether the everything that she knew was the same everything that filled his mind.

*

Lewis’s arm across her shoulders. Rhea could still feel the leverage of it, the steady emanation of success, as she walked back to the flat. She wrapped the warmth that it generated close to herself as she fastened her coat tight against the night frost. *When we are together*, he’d said. She hadn’t joined the others in the bar. She wanted to walk by herself along the towpath. It wasn’t lonely. There were plenty of places, crowded with people; she probably knew someone in every bar, but the solitary walk suited her.

Through the solace of achievement, the image of the amber-imprisoned insect kept resurrecting itself, prodding its way forward in her memory. *Lewis is frightened of me.* Amber believed that, at least for a moment, while she'd said it. *That's what he likes.* It made Rhea uneasy. She'd just seen how absolutely Lewis had needed to stay with his group. He hadn't wanted to go home because his group, the people who depended on him, were his home. She'd seen him consumed with longing to stay, and now she shivered, because she knew, with the certainty of total intimacy, that Amber would never recover from losing the tiniest part of Lewis the way that she had got over losing Dave. Not without a baby to absorb her. She isn't me, Rhea thought, and it isn't Amber that Lewis is frightened of. He lives his real life in a world that she knows nothing about, and he's terrified she'll find out.

Behind her the lights shone out faithfully from the tall block of the Medical School, where other people were still busy, doing work that would help Amber have her baby. Go to Amber, she willed that unborn child; you were made for each other.

Reflected light from the bars bounded across the water in the canal. Success had clutched at all of Lewis's team. The glitter dazzled and shimmered. Its naked intensity filled her with elation and dismay.

*

As soon as the double glazing was finished, Amber was on the phone wanting to show it off. In the weeks since the five hundred thousand pounds, Rhea had been too busy to visit Snitter Heugh; Lewis wasn't bothered. He was forever up at the site of the new Science Park, involved in the renovations there and leaving all the routine work at home to his wife. I'm making sure we get something a whole lot better than this in the future, he was forever saying, looking around the lab for approval. He leaned over now and pressed his finger on the mute button, so that Amber wouldn't hear them. "Go on, Rhea, take the day off. She's lonely up there, all by herself."

Amber had conjured up a whole world around Snitter Heugh: a world that didn't actually exist. Her sister's eyes had the useful knack of colluding in her fantasies and filtered out anything she didn't want to know. If she was lonely, she wasn't likely to admit it.

"I'm meeting the Council reps at the Science Park." Lewis was excusing himself, as usual. "I'll be finished by lunch. I'll come straight home."

Her car climbed out of the city, away from the coastal plain, up towards the hills. The difference in height had a significant effect on the seasons. It was already spring in the city. Primroses flowered demurely in the sheltered suburban gardens, but at Amber's, the buds would still be tightly furled, biding their time until the wind had fallen and the temperature rose. The journey between the two worlds had an unearthly aspect, the reversal of time.

It drew Rhea backwards, to a need that she thought she had left behind: the want of other people. How much easier it was to stay at work in the lab. She would be safely ensconced there tomorrow. Already she was looking forward to warming up the vials and sitting at the microscope watching cells that had been frozen into suspended animation round themselves up. They would lose their jagged edges and smooth out before your eyes. Then they would settle down onto their plastic plates and begin to divide. The next time you looked, where there had been four cells, there would be six, eight. Once you'd seen that happen, you could never forget just how powerful life was: how it could come back from a frozen nothing, and flourish, if it wanted to. It had to want to: Rhea had always understood that. It was important to her, sitting there at the microscope, to know that it wanted to.

When she arrived at Snitter Heugh, there were giant four X fours parked carelessly, all over the courtyard, so that there was no room for her neat coupé. Amber didn't appear to be lonely at all: she had so many friends that her own sister had to abandon her car on the muddy verge outside the gate.

Rhea couldn't work out exactly what the difference was, but since she had last been there, the house had undergone a change. Not just the windows. The door. That was it. The door was new: made from massive oak planks, riveted instead of nailed. The step was still the same though, worn in the centre. Amber would have kept that step, low in the middle, so that a child could climb it. She hadn't changed at all.

Rhea hesitated, surprisingly unwilling to go forward. She wondered what all these country friends would be like. If the cost of Sarah Pindon's brother's double glazing was anything to go by, they certainly knew their market value. High self-esteem

here, she imagined. For weeks she'd hardly spoken to anyone outside the lab, scarcely remembered what small talk was. She had no idea what to talk about, what would interest them. Their bored, polite manners were already dismissing her. These confidantes of Amber's had been a convenience when she was at work. Now the reality of them crowded up uncomfortably close against her.

Amber flung the door open.

Half a dozen pairs of eyes turned toward Rhea making the kitchen feel like a waiting room full of gawping strangers. But she didn't have to think of anything amusing to say to them. A shared past enclosed them and its story was in full flow. The only way that anyone got to speak was by interrupting someone else. Between them, they spared Rhea the trouble of being friendly. Their close friend, Amber, too, sat on the margins.

Esmé stood to look outside, checking on the dogs left in the car, and as she walked to the window she brushed against Rhea. She smelled of fragrance, woody and spicy: a man's scent, unexpected in someone with that ethereal face. But there was something else mixed with it, hard to place, but familiar. Weed? Did they smoke to pass the long winter evenings? Rhea couldn't imagine; she had no handle on their lives, no data to extrapolate. Then, before she decided on just what that undercurrent of smell was, Rhea was already saying to Amber "You could get a dog to keep you company."

The room glittered with approval. She had said something Amber's neighbours could relate to. A Rhea-shaped gap opened up in their awareness and let her in. Rhea listened in surprise to stories of people, long gone, who still inhabited the women's communal memory. This shared past was more real to them than she and Amber were. The double glazing hadn't kept the countryside out; it had trapped it inside Snitter Heugh and the kitchen seemed full of other people, present and past, casually elbowing her out of the way. The house was Amber's, but it seemed to belong more truly to everyone else. Even ghosts had come back to stake their claim, more vivid than hers. The talk went on around her and Rhea sat apart to wait it out.

At last the guests were leaving. Rummaging out something to kick-start the next conversation, one of them turned to Rhea, seeking to slot her into place.

"Well," she said giving an offended pull to her hat. "We've told you all about our lives but you haven't told us anything about yours. What do you do?"

“I work with Lewis.”

At last Rhea and Amber were able to exchange an amused glance of understanding, made possible by the reality of their own past.

“But I thought you were Amber’s sister.”

“Amber is my sister.”

Eyes that had been systematically inspecting the room, taking note of the furnishings, stayed on Rhea now, snared into allowing her a measure of her own existence. She wanted to go on surprising them out of their smugness. She wanted to say that she had been here first, before Amber, actually. That she had worked for Lewis and introduced him to Amber. Everything else, the wedding, the move to the country, the baby thing, it all came after her. But Amber gave her a warning look, a look full of resignation as though she was thinking, do I always have to be the little sister, even in my own home. A look that was enough to stop Rhea. She couldn’t. In Amber’s house, in front of her friends, people she relied on. She wasn’t going to upstage her. Instead she said “and I work with Lewis too.”

Rhea closed the door and waited until she was certain that they had gone before she moved her car into the courtyard. The climate control was pulling in smells, wood burning - it must have been a bonfire - and vegetation that had rotted sour under the frost. There was noise everywhere: birds cawed raucously; a rotary saw ground away somewhere down the valley and there was the steady phut of a diesel engine. Work was going on all over the place. Amber was inside, alone. What did she do these long days?

Chopping. Those fridge shelves were crammed now. Amber was inflating the organic food market all by herself. She was forever cooking. She could chop vegetables faster than a sous chef. At least there’d be something nice for lunch. When Rhea went back into the kitchen, she let the wind in with her; there was the slam of a caught door and the slap of books falling to the floor. She picked them up, grimacing at a pair of sumptuous cookery books that Amber had been given as wedding presents: all style and impossible recipes, the sort of thing that her work colleagues thought indispensable. Amber had never as much as opened them when she lived in the city, in easy reach of the deli and the supermarket, but she was undeniably using them now; the spines were cracked and broken where she had folded them back. Rhea turned one over so that she

could see the cover. *Healing Food*. Amber had it snatched out of Rhea's hands before she could open it; she pushed it into the bookshelf.

"I was just going to read that," Rhea told her, although it wasn't true. She reached for the book again and Amber's face lit up at the chance of intimacy, then she thought better of it. She probably remembered that Rhea scorned alternative medicine. Her voice fell loosely. "You wouldn't like it."

"Well I would Amber, if it made any sense."

Sense. Nothing quite made sense to Amber at the moment. Sometimes Rhea could barely recognise her sister. Thrashing beneath the urgency of all this chopping was the turmoil of steroid overload; it was perfectly possible that Amber could scarcely recognise herself.

"Sweetheart ... I didn't mean that – I meant, I'd like it for you - because you do. Oh, you know what I mean."

Rhea held the book with particular care and put it neatly back in its place, wishing she could do the same to her sister.

Lewis came home in a good mood. Amber gave him the remains of the coffee.

"How was your meeting, sweetie?"

"Fine. Yes OK."

"What happened, then?"

Lewis looked at Rhea's plate where his fingers picked through the cake crumbs. He lifted his cup. "Any more?" Rhea heard the gurgle of the coffee as Amber drained the pot.

Lewis wasn't going to tell her anything about his meeting. He didn't want her there with him, blurring his concentration. But Amber was alert to him, guessing his wants before he knew them himself. "Cake?"

She went off, hurtling around the kitchen for a plate, a fork, a napkin. Rhea watched in alarm as she ran about, frantic.

"Be careful," she warned as Amber slipped on the floor and crashed against the edge of the table. She tottered for a moment, Lewis jumped to help her. The muffin tin flew up and caught her on the mouth.

Sharp steel brushed tender skin. There was nothing at first, then a thin line of red welled from the scratch. It was a light, shallow cut, but the blood flowed freely.

“Stay still.”

Lewis lowered her into a chair and turned to the sink. “You’re not quite back to yourself yet. Eleanor said to take things easy.”

At the mention of Eleanor, Amber put her pouting smile on, her overblown rose smile, dark and crimson as if its petals were just about to fall. The tin had cut her lip. A drop of blood hung, trembling, for as long as it could, then it dropped onto the table, a globe that couldn’t spread out on the waxy surface. Rhea wiped it away.

Lewis came back with a tea towel and a wet, cold-looking wad of tissues that he clamped to her lips. Drops of the water fell onto her dress. The fabric darkened as though it was dissolving. He stood over her, winding his fingers into her hair and Rhea watched him, remembering the way her sister had looked in hospital. Over her head, they watched each other, Lewis and Rhea, waiting to see what would happen.

Amber wriggled herself free, pulling a face.

“I think I’m still in one piece,” she said. “But you two look as if you have seen a ghost.” She picked up Rhea’s coffee cup. “Here, drink it. It’s getting cold.” Rhea sat down weakly and did as she was told.

Lewis shook his head, as though he was shaking off bad dreams.

“You know, I thought it was all starting up again. You being ill.”

“Oh no. You’re not taking me back to the hospital. I’m fine, honestly.”

Amber looked from one to the other. Her mouth trembled. It might have been a smile or the beginning of tears. The blood sprang again and she wiped it away. “It was so lonely until you two came. They were kind, you know, those other patients, but it was you two I wanted there.”

The nonchalant smile when she’d told them to go to the conference had been a fraud, perpetrated to help them. As they all talked, affirming their own reality, Rhea could feel those visiting women dwindle and Snitter Heugh’s history faded back into the past.

Lewis kept leaning towards Amber, to listen more carefully, or leaning back, to look at her face. Rhea had never known him so absorbed in another person. This was the place in the world that he and Amber did share; a place that only existed for the two of them. The space between Lewis and Amber shrank and stretched as he moved, making

room for something that was part of them, but more than they were. A baby. It made her think of Dave, and the way the two of them had always turned away from each other and hidden themselves. There had been no welcome for a baby there.

Lew got up to put some driftwood on the fire where it spurted purple flames.

“Potassium.”

Amber laughed and now that Lewis was out of reach she picked up Rhea’s hand and rubbed it between her palms.

“I’m not having any chemicals in my paper, only natural things.”

Rhea indulged her. She didn’t point out that some of the most poisonous substances known were natural chemicals. Mother Nature knows only too well how to destroy her own. One molecule of ricin per acetylcholine transmitter and that’s it: you’re never going to feel anything again. She could picture, in awesome detail, the molecular diagrams that illustrated their lethal modes of action, a few molecules per synapse. Agrichemical companies didn’t get a look in at that level.

They all gazed quietly at the fire.

Amber began to pick the seeds out of a pomegranate, the latest in a long line of superfoods that would solve all her problems.

“You should have some too, Lewis. And you Rhea. You always look washed out.” She would have them all picking at pomegranate seeds, dishes on knees.

“You’re not allowed to eat them yet.” But the chubby little grains were bursting as soon as they were touched and Lewis and Rhea kept eating them, breaking them between their tongues and the roofs of their mouths.

“Sorry Amber, they just wouldn’t wait,” Rhea said in answer to her cross look.

“It’s instant gratification. When I want something, I want it now.”

There was an uncomfortable silence, as they all took in the idea of wanting and now. Lewis and Amber both stared down into their dishes as though they were counting the grains.

“Oh God, I’m sorry. Again.” She really meant it this time. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Amber was bright again; she didn’t even mention the baby word. “The paper making is taking off. I might even have an order. Simon and Martin are

going to deliver a crucible for putting the mash in.” She checked on Lewis with a careful glance. “It won’t cost much.”

The pomegranate seeds kept lifting themselves up to Lewis’s mouth, small spurts of sweetness to counteract the souring of the atmosphere. “They’re reclaiming it from some old iron works that closed down years ago.”

“Liberating it, then.” A half-hidden aggression clouded Lewis; he shifted his shoulders.

“It’s been lying in their yard for years. It’s good that it is going to be used again. That’s something I really like about the country. They never throw anything away.” There had to be a lurch in space-time as Rhea took in the new Amber, the recycled version that had replaced the patently disposable one she used to be.

“It’s nicked, Amber. That’ll be why they live in a fortress,” Lewis said with triumphant finality. “I wondered what they were scared of.”

The sight of the bullet holes that decorated every signpost in the area came into Rhea’s mind. Lewis always complained that the local kids had nothing to do, and they all had air guns, and powerful motor bikes. He insisted that drive-by shootings of sign posts was the neighbourhood hobby. The rural harmony that Amber basked in wasn’t apparent to him. She hurried to defend it.

“Lewis, that’s security. They go to Spain every year for four months, when it’s too cold to work outside here. They have to leave the house empty. You would do the same.”

The idea that the builders went away for so long cheered Lewis up a bit, but the atmosphere was curdled now. Sitting by the fire, semi-darkness outside the windows and eating pomegranate seeds, it felt like late evening. They were surprised to realise that it was just past two and half of the day was still to come.

“I’ll go now. I’ve got to call in the lab,” Rhea said, but there wasn’t going to be any escaping the emotional force field. Amber was straight on her case.

“I’ve made something for us all to eat. You’ll have to stay for it.” She swept aside the vegetables that she’d prepared and put duck breasts onto the chopping board. She looked at them distastefully, slicing the white, soft fat and the dark dense meat tentatively, sliver by sliver.

“Do ducks get foot and mouth?” she asked, her knife pausing as she waited for the answer.

“No,” said Lewis. “You have to have a cloven hoof.”

“Do you?” Amber’s eyes widened in surprise, and relief. The knife began to cut again, more quickly. “I didn’t know that. But you never forget anything do you?” Lewis took a spoonful of the pomegranate seeds and she opened her mouth obediently. In they went, syrupy medicine, to cure everything.

The stir-fry duck had a metallic taste, like mercury fillings. Rhea always thought that it indicated the presence of some obscure trace element. It ought to be doing Amber good. She could imagine the molecular complex wending its way around her digestion, passing through the cell wall and embedding itself into an enzyme, the enzyme that was crucial to the initiation of a pregnancy. Once that switch was thrown, there would be a cascade of other switches, reaction after reaction: the tiny ball of cells taking shape. She watched Amber flinch as she tasted it. Perhaps she was secretly afraid of being taken over like that, of having to surrender the body she’d taken such care of. Her sister’s lips were dry with the cold and wind at Snitter Heugh and her pink tongue protruded out to soothe them.

Asthma? Quick, inhaler. Or was Amber being strangled? She was croaking in sharp gasps.

“What?” The two of them stood, paralysed by indecision, while Amber coughed and choked.

She pulled away and spat out her dinner. The yellow of the corn, the green of the mange-tout and the brown duck all mixed together, and a pearled glimmering pomegranate seed.

She was crying, but at least she was breathing properly. Lewis stared, bemused. She sat down again, rocking to and fro and moaning.

“Don’t cry,” Rhea heard herself saying, over and over. “Don’t cry, Amber, it’s all right now, all right” But Amber kept on wailing, her mouth a great hole in her face. She rooted inside her cheek. Rhea was afraid she was still choking. Then Amber was on her knees, scrambling on the floor.

“She’s fainting Lewis.” He knelt down to her. Thrusting him aside Amber pounced on the pomegranate seed she had spat out.

“I’ve broken my tooth!”

The wailing got louder. “Oh no! Christ! Look, it’s come right out.”

She was right. It wasn’t a seed; it was a piece of her tooth. Lewis flushed suddenly, a fine film of sweat on his face, alarmed by her panic. Amber let him look in her mouth and Rhea could see the way he had to steel himself against what he might see, but it was only a broken tooth. When he confirmed it, “It’s a chip off a back molar,” Amber turned invalid again and started to shake.

While she sat and wrapped her arms around her chest, rocking herself in misery, Lewis phoned the dentist. He came back and said that Mr Edwards would see her that afternoon.

“I’ll drive you straight down,” he promised. “It’s all right, love. He’ll sort it out; you’ll be home in no time. You’ll see. It’ll be fine. ”

“You won’t want the rest of this food,” Rhea said. It seemed an inordinate drama about a chip from a tooth.

“I’ll take it with us,” Lewis said, picking up the fragment of Amber’s tooth and looking at it, so small, so pearlised.

“Her tooth,” he wondered. “It’s really smashed. I can see the dentine in this bit.”

Rhea couldn’t understand how either of them could make such a fuss about so little. As Lewis put the broken-off molar into a plastic bag, Amber began to look a little shamefaced.

“You’ll come with me too won’t you Rhea? You will? Lewis hates anything like this.”

There was a photograph of their wedding on the wall. Amber and Lewis legally joined together. Lewis was looking straight at the lens, but Amber was turning towards Rhea, bestowing her bouquet. *You next*, she had said. What a fuss Bridezilla had made over that wedding. She’d had Rhea go over every detail with her for months. Bored or busy, Lewis was expert at keeping out of the way and sometimes Rhea had wondered whose wedding it actually, was: Amber and Lewis’s or Amber and their mother’s.

“It’s because of the meat,” Amber was saying. “It’s my own fault. I shouldn’t have started eating it.”

Lewis had his car keys ready, waiting to play his part in the drama of his marriage.

“I’ll drop you both off, and then I’ll call at the lab for you, Rhea. Check on the cells, then pick you both up again.”

“You should go with her Lewis. I’ll see to the cells.”

But Lewis was even more determined than Amber. His lab key card was already gripped in his hand. Rhea remembered how he shook at the sight of Amber’s split lip. She shrugged.

“It’s all sorted then, you can come with me.” Amber gave a watery smile and it was sorted as far as she was concerned. *Oh, get off the stage Amber*, Rhea thought, as she wrote off the rest of her day.

It was dark by the time that Amber was safely home and Rhea was driving back to the city alone. Sleet began to pit against the windscreen, bright little spots ringing with light. It should have been snow, silent and calm, but the sleet was nice too. Lewis had checked on the lab. The incubators were safe; the temperatures were all running at blood heat, the carbon dioxide levels were just right, all the monitors were green, the alarm systems showing sleep mode. But she knew that Amber would be lying wide awake, goaded by her broken tooth and her empty womb.

Chapter 11

Nine am, and April. Two weeks into the new IVF cycle. Even this high up and this far out, day was beginning to crack the chill of the early morning. It was starting to get light outside. The sun, still low on the horizon, had given the clouds great red underbellies that scraped along the tops of the Flimton hills, but the land stubbornly clung to the browns and greys of twilight. Inside the outhouse was a deep, morning dusk. Propping the door open gave a fuzzy rectangle of illumination and the windows cast faint light-shadows on the workbench, but still Amber had to wait for her eyes to adjust to the uncertainty of the light.

The night before, she had pulped computer paper. Early drafts of Lewis' publications, shredded into a white and black ticker tape, were mashed into water until they were unrecognisable, a greyish mush with a thick crust rising to the surface.

"Best place for them," Lewis said, giving them a final prod with a stick. "It doesn't look much for all that work, does it?" He'd be expecting her to protest, to say that everything he did was important and would all fit together in the long run, but she couldn't summon up the energy. Somehow, there didn't seem anything to do but agree with him.

Even now, after a night of fathomless, dreamless sleep, Amber felt tired and heavy. The crucible gave off an odour of sourness, like a fermentation that was just beginning. She had to take a deep breath before she plunged inside the room, and when she couldn't contain it any longer and she finally breathed out, the exhaled air stirred the surface of the mash; it wasn't as solid as it looked. She wanted it as smooth as possible so she probed the crust with the stick and broke it up. A quick stir made a homogeneous paste and she leaned over the crucible with her mould, to scoop up the mixture. It ran comfortably into the frame. She lifted it dripping onto the bench and began to squeeze the water out, with practised strokes. This was the fifth time she'd made paper. The other times had been practice runs; the paper had been uneven, or the colour patchy, but now she knew she could rely on her judgement, certainly for small batches. This time she needed only a few sheets, but they had to be perfect. Flat, even sheets to match the tapestry for the infertility unit, so that one could be framed and hang in the unit with her mother's name on it.

“And your name, Amber,” Stella had insisted. “*Paper by Amber*, here at the top.” Rhea had stared away.

The dirty, organic-looking mess would dry to a clean soft colour. She’d added some dye, blue like the colour of sky, like the colour of the line on a pregnancy testing kit. The passes her hands were making over the surface of the wet paper were steady, they would mould it smooth. By the door there was a sack, full of thistledown, collected from her own gateway. She dried her hands to touch it so that when she brought out a handful it didn’t stick to her but floated away around the room. Snatching it back from the air, Amber pressed it down into the surface of the paper, leaving a clear space in the centre for the writing. The wispy filaments were waxy; they weren’t easy to wet and they were too light to stay down; they dampened and curled. Like babies’ hair, she thought, as she covered it with the fine gauze that would support it until it dried.

She bent over the crucible to scoop up the final dregs of the mash and brushed her breasts, only lightly, against the curved edge, but she winced back. It hurt, much more than it should. Her whole body felt jarred and touchy. The weight of her abdomen pressed down; it seemed too heavy to bear, and the smell of the damp paper left no air to breathe. Amber went outside, back into the light. She leaned against the wall.

The river down in the valley bed was full, fed by the winter’s rain, and she could hear the tumult of its rush down to the sea. Already Amber had learned to tell, just from the sound, how high up the banks it would be. The deep boom that underpinned the shift and clicking of the stony river bed meant that it had reached the arches of the bridge in the village. It would crush, choked, through the narrow gap and wouldn’t widen or soften until it reached the estuary plain where it would spread out, and wander in dozens of rivulets, half sea, half river, for three or four miles. Vikings had come up that river once, looking for people like her. They’d sailed in long flat boats up the estuary. Whenever the water got too shallow they just put down their oars, picked up the boats and carried them, swarming right up the valley. She could see a curve of water from where she was standing, silver like a sword must have looked. Would she have stayed to fight, or would she have run? It might not have made much difference, whether you fought or hid. If you saw that glint, that dark swarm, your life would never go back to being the same.

The dozen or so steps across the yard felt much further, like a long journey. Rather than climb up to the bathroom she sat on a hard wooden chair and looked at the staircase. Rhea had dumped yet another pregnancy testing kit into the cabinet, pushing the aromatherapy oil bottles to the back.

“At least you’ll know, one way or another,” she said, as though that was all there was to it, a simple knowing or not knowing.

The chair had uneven legs. Amber rocked on it, to and fro.

Knowing, or not knowing, not knowing or knowing. How straightforward everything was for Rhea.

Not knowing, she decided. At least you could hope. She fended off despair. There wouldn’t be many more chances, Eleanor Bonworth had explained. Medical science could only do so much.

Waking that morning, Amber had felt sick. Wasn’t that how it happened? You woke up, you felt sick. But it had been only a hint of queasiness, like something flickering at the edge of your vision: a tic in your eye, a tiredness from a longing that wouldn’t settle down. It was almost midday. Rhea was coming after work, at about seven. That was a whole day’s work away. Amber could know by then, she could know in the next five minutes. A few drops of urine, that was all it took. She could feel pressure in her bladder, mounting into an ache. She’d left the door open and the kitchen radio was talking quietly, working its way up to the news. Amber was all alone, inside her own walls. If she howled her lungs out, no one would hear her. No colleagues, no mother, no Rhea, no Lewis would look on with pity. The relief of it was like a deluge, clean and fast. She tried out her voice, where it couldn’t be heard.

“No one will know,” she said loudly. “Only me.” At that moment the radio pipped the hour, pinning her words to the kitchen wall. “I’m doing it.”

But she crossed and closed and locked the door before climbing the stairs, deliberately stepping on each of the treads as though they were the rungs of a very old and shaky ladder.

The kit was still at the front of the cabinet, exactly where she had left it last time. Amber didn’t need to read the instructions; she’d had plenty of practice. I know more about this than Rhea does, she told herself, more than Lewis. A yank at her skirt, she was

still wearing the waterproof apron for paper-making and it got in the way, she had to lug it off and let it drop onto the floor. Reluctant fingers grasping her knickers, Amber closed her eyes as she pulled and when she opened them again, it was there, the splash of fresh, red blood that meant no baby.

*

Shame fingered Rhea, making her shield her face.

“I don’t think I will ever be able to have a baby. I’ve just had my first round of progesterone and have been diagnosed with hyperstimulation syndrome. Could anyone tell me what this means?”

Flashing on the screen, in moments, came the answers.

“It happened to me too, but now I have a six-month old little girl. Good Luck.”

“It happened to me too. I still haven’t conceived but I haven’t given up hope. Good Luck.”

There was a Freudian slip in the third response, a lapse into baby talk that Rhea found agonising.

“Goo Luck.”

She put her hands over her eyes and pressed but the words were still there, burned on her retina: after-images of despair.

Eleanor had pushed the web address on her saying that the emotional dimension of infertility was under-considered in her experience. How often it proved to be a significant barrier to conception. Patients need emotional support. We know too much for some people, she had supposed.

Rhea couldn’t bear to know so much. She closed the website down before any other desperate woman could expose herself. It didn’t feel right, ogling pain. She hadn’t meant to infiltrate their generosity and spy on these women’s tenuous hopes. Their disembodied hurt had sidled too close, attaching itself to someone who had no right to it. Pulling it closer and pushing it away felt equally shameful. Stupefied by the choice, Rhea clicked on her stats programme and watched the figures scurry around the screen and resolve themselves systematically into manageable columns.

The air crawled with noise. Outside the windows, seagulls screeched as they fought over food dumped in the campus bins. Inside the room, microfuges whirled on and

off, faster and more purposeful than the birds, but just as noisy, and all the students were chattering and joshing, while they slapped racks on and off holders. Even ramming her earphones further in and turning up her music couldn't shut it all out. Lewis was standing over her pushing his face into hers.

"You weren't listening," he complained.

"Yes, I was Lew. To something else."

Lewis was re-homing the cells. He needed an inventory of all the stocks they held, for the patent application, and no-one else would do it. In the final push to get everything finished, he'd become the most dispensable person in the team and had to shoulder the most menial jobs. He opened the lid of the liquid nitrogen freezer and vanished into a mist of condensed water vapour. When he reappeared, he was clasping a straw of cells, tiny vials held in a metal holder.

"Look," he said. "I've found some of the cells from before we had all that dishwasher trouble. Do you think we should try them?" The misplaced cells smoked with cold, so that Rhea had to peer closely to see their date.

"SA 153, from last summer." It seemed a world away, a world that had disappeared. Was it possible they'd ever been so naïve? So innocent? She felt much older now and yet here were the cells, preserved in their primeval state. "Put them back," she told him. "They'll be ruined if you keep them out in the lab like that."

But Lewis was handling the pristine straw, thoughtfully, as though he was remembering too, a time when they had a single, clear objective, the quest for stem cell yield. It was straightforward, next to the juggling of business concerns and patent issues, but monochrome, too, compared with the kaleidoscope of new experiences tumbling around them now.

"Do you miss the lab, Lewis?"

"No." He dropped the straw back through the neck of the freezer into the top rack. "I wouldn't want to be stuck in here now." The insulated stopper slotted back into place: the cells would be safe as long as no-one forgot to top up the nitrogen.

But how could she tell Lewis that her own focus on his work was slipping?

Rhea met Eleanor for lunch in the hospital refectory. She chose a hidden corner, behind a pillar but with a view of the door so she could check if anyone who knew her

came in and told Lewis. No one was interested in them. The room was full of staff eating lunch, but they were still on the ward, really, close to their responsibilities. Who knew what might happen in the next half-hour? Urgent requests got in the way of meal times, so here, in the place of healing, food was scarcely noticed and colourful recipe books, unheard of. Unlike Snitter Heugh.

When Eleanor talked about something, it was impossible to imagine that it wouldn't happen. The way she concentrated her attention made what she said seem real and solid. She sat with her back to the door, not watching over Rhea's shoulder for someone more important to speak to, or looking through her as though she was transparent. A grant application lay in its official envelope on the table between them. If it was successful, then, also on the table, for Rhea, was a lab of her own in the Medical School and access to cord blood, an unrivalled source of stem cells, through Eleanor.

"The synergy's there. We should go for it. I'll tell you what, Rhea," Eleanor folded her hands decisively. "It's a date. This summer you and I will have lunch together somewhere nicer than this, and with any luck, we'll be celebrating getting this grant." She glanced at the clock. A consultant's time wasn't her own. It belonged to her patients and her colleagues. "I've got a clinic. Lunch again next week?"

"Eleanor.....?" A week seemed a long time to Rhea. Gossip passed from the hospital to the University at the speed of light. "I don't want to be difficult but Lewis..... I haven't told him yet."

Eleanor leaned forward and rested her hands on the table while Rhea searched her features for signs of disgust, or distrust, but there were none: only a bland, uncommitted appraisal of the situation.

"There's no need to go public about anything yet." She leaned her weight into her hands and stood up, "Let's see how it goes."

Alone, Rhea stayed at the table for a few minutes, testing out her feelings around a post in the hospital. All around her beeps were going off and people were rushing, needed elsewhere. The immediacy made you forget about yourself; know just how alive you really were. She couldn't imagine Eleanor feeling traumatised by the sight of the infertility website. She did something about it. Gave hope, or if there wasn't any, at least, resolution.

Back in the lab there was only more routine. Katherine wanted Rhea to help her interpret some more gel traces; she was bent over the light box where the fluorescent tubes were throwing the light and dark bands into high contrast.

“Have you shown them to Lewis?” Rhea asked and got back a decisive shake of the head.

“No, he hasn’t the time.”

They settled down together, Rhea checking to and fro, from the negatives to the sample printout, Katherine marking down the reference values. The pairs fitted neatly together: five, five; nine, nine; eleven, eleven. At least the traces weren’t giving any problems; Rhea managed a smile in Katherine’s direction and saw the twitch of excitement that pulled about her mouth. Katherine had worked hard to get these results out; she was hanging closely onto Rhea’s counting, but her face kept turning towards the door, wanting Lewis to have a look at them. Second-best Rhea could see it in the scribble of disappointment over Katherine’s neat face when he didn’t appear, but she went on reading steadily across the dense bands, moving her finger down the ladder, drawing Katherine with her.

By the time she was half way down the patterns she had forgotten Katherine’s disappointment and focussed all her attention on the work. The hankering for symmetry, the placing of pattern that had always absorbed her, here it was: a match right down the run. She might have envied Eleanor her knowledge of fertility, but this was where Rhea’s own expertise lay. She was going to have to upset Katherine. These results were far too good to be true.

Katherine radiated excitement, she held herself so still now that Rhea could feel the heat that came from her. She gave her most sympathetic smile into Katherine’s coming disappointment.

“Kate, can you remember which cells you took?”

Katherine shot her an angry look of disbelief. A sour reminder to Rhea of all the effort Katherine had made.

“You must have used duplicate lots of the same cells. You had better do them again,” she said, adding, “Make sure you check the labels on the cultures.”

Katherine gave a resentful nod, preparing to do the work again and propelling Rhea back to her own days as a post-doc in Vic's lab and the Californian attitude of can-do. Their pulse of positivity had been lost, along with the dying cells and regret about the conference. Perhaps they could resurrect it? That original batch of cells Lewis was so keen on was still pristine, in the freezer.

"Hey," Rhea said, "Lewis found some of the old cells, from before they went wrong. Why don't you give them a try?"

She didn't mean to tell Lewis about Kate's mistake when they were driving back to Snitter Heugh that evening. She meant to keep him out of it.

The weather was just on the turn. It was lighter in the evenings now; the Convertible felt like a transparent bubble gliding across the countryside, instead of the darkly armoured capsule it had seemed on winter nights. Lewis was concentrating on negotiating the tricky bends that he negotiated every day of his life.

"The thing is, Rhea, we can't publish any of your stuff, not until the patent application's in. Next year, maybe."

There was a pause, like the moment between a detonation and a building falling down.

"Christ's sake, Lewis. You never said it would take that long." Without a couple of decent publications from her current project, Rhea would never get her own funding. Never mind that she hadn't actually told Lewis that she wanted some. His eyes flickered, momentarily, away from the road and towards her, his face exposed, the cover torn off.

"I didn't think you'd mind. Some of those cells are turning out to be better than we thought. I bet those SA153's do the trick." The soft, leather seats kept up their steady embrace. You could hardly feel that the car was moving at all.

He'd wrecked her chances of setting up her own team; the thought took up Rhea's entire mind. Lewis had kept everything to himself; she wouldn't be able to capitalise on any of the work she had done for him.

"You should have told me."

"I'm telling you now. We're really on to something. Concentrate on that early SA153 strain, have anyone else you want to help you. Leave everything else, just go for 153."

His knuckles relaxed their white grip on the steering wheel. The car still went sanguinely on, so did Lewis. "I want you to take it over. If we can get a decent patent on them, it'll be the making of all of us."

The form for the Medical Research Council was tucked into her briefcase in the back of the car. Rhea thought of Eleanor and she held her head steady now, fixed on the thought of independence. The run of Lewis's success couldn't pull her so easily off course.

"It'll be the making of you Lewis, but I really need some publications." She hesitated. "I can't afford two years in a row without anything."

"Oh don't worry." The airy confidence of his new money made Lewis unsympathetic. "If this pans out, there'll be plenty of money to keep paying everyone. Perhaps we won't even need paying." Rhea raised her eyebrows. "Under my University contract, I'll be entitled to a decent proportion of any patent income," he explained. But he didn't explain how this would help Rhea.

She stayed quiet, pretending a calm thoughtfulness that she wasn't feeling. She looked away from Lewis and out of the window. She ought to tell him straight but the risk was immeasurable. There wasn't anything definite to say. They were driving up the costal plain. Great, flat fields stretched away to either side, but they weren't big enough to hold her discontent.

Lewis put out feelers towards her.

"Katherine's project won't be confidential, you know. That paper I'm writing with her, I was thinking that you ought to be on it too. You're the one who's had to supervise her. You could be first author, Rhea."

"No, Lewis," Rhea protested. "It wouldn't be fair on Katherine. It's her project."

But her voice was already trailing off into complicity. With so many disappointments and dupings of her own behind her, it wouldn't take much to persuade her and she already knew it.

"She wouldn't have got off first base if you hadn't helped her. Of course you're on the publication. I was meaning to say so, anyway."

That's true enough, Rhea reasoned, I've helped her every day.

"This morning..." – She'd started. There was no stopping it now - "You know what she did?" And she told Lewis what she had meant to keep to herself.

They were still talking about Katherine's mistake when they got home. The diversion made them falsely cheerful.

"We've all been there," joked Lewis.

"We're all probably still there," said Rhea. "We've just got better at covering it up." And she laughed as she said it.

As they got out of the car, wind caught the door and slammed it shut, just as Lewis pressed the lock. The rear door stayed closed as Rhea tugged at it. They both looked through the window at their workbags in the well of the back seat.

"Leave them," Rhea said. "We won't get any more done tonight. Amber won't let us."

"Go on in." Lewis's key released the door with a twitch of his thumb. "I'll get them."

For just one fraction of a moment Rhea caught his eyes over the roof of the car. She looked away, wary with complications. Papers from Eleanor pushed between her own. She could feel guilt mottling her skin. But Lewis wouldn't open her bag, would he? He leant into the recess, his back twisting awkwardly. "I'll see to yours," he called into the enclosed space, so she went up to the house.

There was no need to ring the bell; the door wasn't locked. The kitchen was chilled, invigorating, as though the windows were open and a sharp breeze had blown through, but it wasn't dishevelled at all. In fact it was especially tidy, and Amber was wafting her hairdryer about, drying paper.

"You're late," said Amber, probably auditioning for the role of put-on wife.

"It's me, not Lewis."

"I know that. Lewis would have closed the door."

She spoke as though Lewis was always closing doors, closing them on her. There was something about the set of her turned back that stopped Rhea from trying to pass it off as a joke. Instead she almost closed the door in Lewis's face.

He dumped Rhea's bag at her feet and headed off to the study with his own, leaving the door swinging on its hinges. Rhea closed it with pernicky care and avoided

Amber's eyes. She was tired and hungry. Lunch with Eleanor felt like it had happened to somebody else. She wondered what Amber had planned for dinner when she realised that she couldn't smell any cooking. She couldn't see any evidence of preparation either: no pans, or peelings or anything, only the sheets of paper, spread out, resolutely occupying all the benches.

"I bet you're tired, babes. I know I am. May be we could eat out."

At last Amber turned around.

"I wouldn't mind. I'm not really hungry, but I don't fancy staying in."

Her hands and eyes were steady; Rhea wouldn't have known that anything was truly wrong if she hadn't looked at her mouth, the way it worked around words like 'mind' and 'not' as though they were stuck on her tongue. She's upset, Rhea thought. Things didn't show much on Amber, through the expert make up, but the blusher on her cheeks stood out, hectically normal, all at odds with her pallor. Lewis was back, reading the paper, oblivious, but Rhea could feel the strain mounting in her sister. Outbursts were only a wrong word away.

Rhea tried to swing her mind round to the right words. What would Eleanor say?

"Are you going to tell Amber about the patent, Lewis, or shall I?"

Lewis shrugged uncomprehendingly, as though he had never heard of patents.

"Come on," Rhea urged. "She has the right to know."

Still Lewis was silent. The two women looked down at him, while he glanced from one to the other. Rhea couldn't bear the tension, she turned to her sister. "Lewis thinks if we can get a patent on some of the work, it could make a lot of money." As she said it she became aware of that word, *we*. With Amber relying on her, she'd felt part of it again. She drew Amber close to her. "Perhaps it'll pay for your renovations."

At the mention of renovations Lewis joined in.

"If it goes well, you'll be able to have anything you want done."

Anything you want sounded a bit much to expect.

"Why don't we treat ourselves to a take away?"

At the idea of a take away, Amber suddenly perked up. Yes, Lewis would run down to the village for it. He got up without a word and memorised the order: Chicken tikka

masala, Bombay potatoes, vegetable sagg, dahl and, for Amber, poppadums; she couldn't eat a curry without the dry, crispy taste of a poppadum.

It was almost dark, but remnants of daylight reflected down from the clouds so that Rhea could see Lewis walk down to the car, turn and look back at the house. She waved, then Amber switched on the lights and Rhea caught sight of herself in the window, her brow furrowed with lines of anxiety. The night time shuffles of the house settling itself against the cold were still for a moment, as if it held its breath, but Amber couldn't keep still.

She blundered around as though she couldn't get out of her own way. And Rhea couldn't get out of Amber's way. She hadn't brought her own car and would have to stay at Snitter Heugh. Amber pushed her paper to make room for the supper plates. The sheets were thick and smooth but they wouldn't slip against one another. Rhea ran her fingers over them. They felt like fabric. Their mother shone through Amber's skin.

"So there's no one special at the minute, Rhea? You've only got yourself to please."

Amber smiled, as if she'd known all along. She stopped sorting plates. Lewis had disappeared for her. Rhea could sense it and feel the force of her interest.

"There'll be someone else," she said. "You'll see, Rhea. You can't keep yourself safe forever." Then at last she sat down, suddenly tired as if she didn't have the strength to hold up what she was going to say next. Rhea winced at some pain to come.

"The IVF hasn't worked again."

But this time she didn't cry. There was no flooding of tears and grief to wear her out. It was so quiet that the noise of a passing car made them both glance towards the door. Rhea sat down and touched Amber's arm.

"I'm sorry." The website kept popping up in her mind, confusing sympathy and guilt. She should have searched it more thoroughly. It might have given her some idea of what to say, some advice on how to help a sister. An irrefutable acceptance came over her. She realised that she was a part of this, not an outsider at all.

"Rhea, I've been thinking." Amber was watching the door again; she must be waiting for Lewis to get back.

“Have you told Lewis?” Rhea said at the same moment as Amber said, “I haven’t told Lewis,” and there they were, both laughing like one person, the two little girls they used to be.

“You’ll always have me,” Rhea said.

Amber shifted back to look her in the eye.

“You know that I can only have one more try, Eleanor says.” The idea of Eleanor was like a life saver. The way she bobbed up to save them, both of them. Her bouncing cheerfulness, the unrelenting effort, was like a stiff drink.

“She’s marvellous,” Rhea said. “If anyone can do it, she can.”

“Would you do something for me, Rhea? Just now, while you don’t have anyone else to worry about? ”

Rhea moved her arm around her sister’s shoulders. Just the two of them, they would get through this together. In a way there was no need to involve Lewis: let him concentrate on work. She drew Amber close to her.

“We will get through this, I promise.”

“Because there was something I wanted to talk to you about. I haven’t told anyone.”

“What is it Ambie?” How easily the baby name slipped out again, like the days when Rhea had cared for Amber, hidden her away from the upset, while their mother had nursed their father.

“You said that you would help me.”

“You know I will.” The thought of the grant application with Eleanor wrapped around Rhea. She might tell Amber; just the two of them would know; there was a space between the sisters where Lewis had no place.

“You could do it Rhea. You could help me.”

As Rhea waited, Amber put her hands to her mouth, holding her words in, but they slid through her fingers to find their way out, and then they hovered in the grey space between trepidation and confidence.

“You know surrogacy? When someone else has your baby for you.”

Apprehension squeezed Rhea’s chest, stopping her breath but her words came hurtling along ahead of her thoughts.

“No. No, Amber.”

“What?”

“No.”

“Rhea...”

“Eleanor would never have anything to do with that; it’s against the law.”

The smell of shock, acrid and sulphurous as though an electric current had jumped the gap between them.

“You’re not yourself Amber.” Rhea could scarcely recognise her own voice, it was so weak with fear. Desperation bled out of every pore; she knew what was coming next.

“Don’t ask me. I can’t do that.”

But Amber was insensible to her revulsion; she wasn’t even seeing her. Enthralled by her own compulsion, she saw only a mirror of herself everywhere. She radiated eagerness, conviction.

“Loads of people do it Rhea, loads of them. They do, you know. They do.”

Amber clutched Rhea’s arm to her; she was saying “Sisters do. Of course they do, how could they not? Look at these.”

Amber bounded to the bookcase. From under the haphazard collection of files she drew out an envelope, neatly labelled and dated March, last month. Whatever it was, Amber had been saving it. She began by taking out just one sheet and laying it on the sofa in the space between their two bodies, a picture of two women, both young, both black-haired with the startling blue eyes that occasionally come with such dark colouring, both looking at a baby that was suspended, as if by magic between them. The baby had those same bright blue eyes, although it had no hair. Then Amber was slapping down another picture and another: all sorts of women, all sorts of babies, in a sort of desperate celebration of maternity.

“They’re all sisters who’ve helped each other,” she said, “I got them from the net.”

At the bottom of each picture there was US web address, and a motto, “Infinite Possibilities.” Amber’s face shone with them.

Inside Rhea a cold feeling was spreading: a freezing mist that hid her from herself and held her steady. She was afraid to let herself know what it was she felt - it reached too deep for her to be able to fathom it. Amber's words held her in a pincer movement, *my body, her baby*.

But a jolt of realisation spun her round. This would be Lewis's baby too. Not just a sharing of sisterly flesh: bodies that had come from the same womb. This would be Lewis's baby too, his body, his flesh would invade her and drain the life-blood from her.

"I can't Amber, I can't."

But it was as if Amber couldn't believe her.

"Yes, you just need to get used to the idea. I though it was weird at first, but once I'd thought it through," - her confidence was impenetrable. "It's only natural, Rhea."

Rhea wrenched away.

"You shouldn't ask me, Amber. It isn't fair."

Rhea tried to glare Amber away but Amber came forward again.

"You're brave enough for anything. I know you, Rhea."

But you don't know me, Rhea thought, struggling out of Amber's grip and staring off out of the window. You think I can make everything all right? You don't have any idea what I had to do, because I couldn't go running to you to sort it.

The memory of another baby exploded through her.

When she turned back Amber was still watching her, oblivious to anything but getting her way.

Seeing her hold out her hands, Rhea was blinded by a searing flash of anger. Then in another moment, she watched herself as she flung Amber across the room, screaming at her to drop that shackle of a smile. She shook her sister and pummelled, the soft wool of Amber's sweater scrunching under her hands as she dug for flesh, wanting to draw blood.

Engulfed with horror, suffocated by it, she threw Amber across the room so that her sister's head crashed against the cooker. She leaped back, away from the awful sight and there was Amber, still sitting on the sofa, still holding out her hands.

It mustn't have happened.

Sweat prickled up through Rhea's hair; her legs shook. Her whole body quaked.

But it was her body that had saved her. While her mind had torn her own sister apart, her body that had stayed still, more to be trusted than she could have believed. The adrenalin surge hadn't left her yet; her muscles trembled with the trauma of what she hadn't done.

Amber herself was still defeated. She lowered her hands in a gesture of submission.

Rhea was in agony. She was terrified. She looked back at the darkness outside the window. How had it sprayed into the room like that? Was there a parallel universe, just out there, nearer than she could ever imagine, in which some other Rhea had really done that to Amber. She understood now, how truly terrible the insect trapped in amber was.

The lights of Lewis' car wobbled up the track. Now Amber was frightened too.

She watched the door, nervously.

"Rhea, don't say anything to him. Promise me you won't tell him." She came too close. Rhea flinched away. She could only nod, too grateful to mind that Amber wanted her scheming kept secret, too shocked to trust herself to anything. *I don't even know myself*. The hideous knowledge twisted round and round in her head.

Chapter 12

The warmth of the vial containing the cells, even though it was at -70°C , made the liquid nitrogen crackle and fizz. The freezer was shaped like a futuristic amphora. A dense mist erupted from it and obscured the narrow opening, so that Rhea lowered the straw of cells by experience; she could scarcely see at all, through her acrylic safety mask and then the fog of frozen water vapour. She dropped the stopper into place, clumsily because of her thick safety gloves, and knew that it had gone home when she heard the faint squeak of rubber on frozen metal.

Shaking her hands free of the gloves, Rhea pulled up her visor and saw the last of the fog dissipate. Her breath was almost condensing in the air, the laboratory was so cold. She turned towards Lewis's office to see if he was in. There was no sign of him.

When she removed the safety helmet she could hear the throb of the condensers pounding to cool the air. They were running at the same speed as her heart beat, a mirror image of the warmth underneath her white coat. If she stood still she could feel the matching throb of her pulse, in her chest and in her neck and in her wrists, even, where it was lighter and threatening to flutter. She pulled the coat off as she passed through into the culture room. That was better. The culture suite was kept warm, womb-like with no windows, and damp from the humidifiers in the cell incubators. Racks of bottles containing cell cultures exchanged gases with the atmosphere, turning from violent pink to yellow as the metabolic processes changed the medium from acidic to alkaline. Rhea took out the alkaline ones and began to check the condition of the cultures.

The phase contrast in the microscope distorted reality. The cells she was checking were myelomas, cancer cells. They glowed orange and gold under the magnification: sunny spheres, looking healthy and benign, but that was only a property of the microscope's phase contrast. They drifted in and out of focus. There were a few groups of cells, three or four, still attached together after they had divided. Even as Rhea watched, the halos around them coalesced, making them seem to float in an eerie bath of light. She bumped the microscope, and the cells spun away out of focus.

Her field of vision was left empty. It blurred before she could blink, rapid, determined lifting and lowering of her eyelids to disperse the tears that had started up

from nowhere. Nowhere? Now her throat was constricting. She swallowed once, twice, hard rolls of effort to free the muscles. They must have been constricting the internal carotid artery because she felt faint. She put her head down to relieve the dizziness, her hair falling around her face and shutting out the laboratory and the incubators and the waiting work. Her own arms hugged herself. She rocked and more and more tears welled up and spilled out from her, wetting her clothes, splashing onto the floor, but she was perfectly silent. Through all of this she could hear the quiet click and tick of the incubators switching on their warmth and the carbon dioxide that sustained all the cellular life around her.

Rhea knew that it was all those things that had protected her from what was happening to her, until now. Alone behind the curtain of her own hair she couldn't distract herself any longer from the truth: that the termination she arranged after Dave had left for Nottingham had been the end of a baby, something, someone who would have grown, dividing into arms and legs and an individual quirky body, perhaps like her own. When she had woken afterwards, she hadn't been sure that she wasn't still waiting because she'd felt no different. There'd been a nurse hovering over her.

Is it over? Rhea had asked her. *Is it done?*

Yes the nurse had answered. Hesitating and pretending to smooth the sheets, she'd added, *it's all right if you cry. Most people do.* But Rhea had turned her head and set her lips, so that no crying could possibly take place. The nurse had nodded kindly and left her alone to concentrate painstakingly on a mental diagram of the DNA helix. She had riveted her attention on the thought that the soul that had accidentally lodged inside her had spun, helter-skelter, through the coils of its genes to freedom. Go to Amber, she had whispered and it had frolicked away; to find its real home, in another child.

The savagery of the idea that Amber wanted to send her baby back.

She was overwhelmed now, in a way that she hadn't been until then. She had kept the termination a secret from everyone; she couldn't bear to let Amber suffer that particular pain.

The fluorescent lights in the room shone too bright, Rhea could see the blue veins through the skin on her hands, as though she were transparent, like one of those medical dolls, with the circulatory system painted on the inside of its plastic skin and all its organs

packed inside in a neatly fitting jigsaw puzzle. Only she didn't fit together any longer; some pieces had changed shape, the others were thrown out of kilter. The room was cavernous around her. Usually Rhea liked to work alone, when it was quiet, but tonight she couldn't fill the empty space. Everyone else had left an hour ago; there was nothing left but to go home too. She returned the cell cultures to the incubator, turned off the microscope, checked the equipment and switched off the lights before she left, the familiarity of the routine pacifying her body. She looked towards Lewis' office again. She hadn't seen him go and the light was still on as though it was ready for him to come back. She left it to keep watch.

And all this took place alongside a saddened fear. Amber hadn't mentioned the surrogacy idea again. Don't let her ask me any more, Rhea prayed to some undefined fate. I can't bear it.

As she walked home the chestnut trees were just beginning to break bud, the naked green of the new leaves catching the last of the light. It was spring and she could smell it, the tang of stirred earth, disturbed by the movement of roots and thrusting foliage.

If Amber hadn't mentioned surrogacy again, it was because she was preoccupied by her final round of IVF, her expression determined, as if she could force a child into existence. Even if she asks me again, I won't tell her about the termination, Rhea vowed to herself. She hadn't told anyone. Out of pride, she hadn't told Dave, but it was out of love that she hadn't told Amber.

She had gone to the clinic alone, walked all the way, then watched other people being shepherded by mothers and sisters, only a few by what she took to be boyfriends or husbands. She had felt relieved to take an anonymous taxi home. I won't tell anyone now. But the edges of Rhea were fraying; she was tired, her feet felt heavy as she walked. It seemed difficult to keep everything inside.

She counted her steps as she walked home, so that she wouldn't think, and once inside the flat, she lay on the bed, and rather than know just how alone she was, she fell asleep.

The door bell woke her. She knew where she was; she'd begun to pull herself together. The bedside clock said ten fifteen. By its light, she could see her reflection in

the bedroom mirror; she monitored the dark circles under her eyes, the way the red had receded from the lids. I only look tired, she reassured herself. I'll be alright. The bell rang again so she pressed the intercom.

"It's Lewis. Let me in, Rhea."

Lewis must have taken the steps three at a once, he was up the stairs so quickly. She only had time to wipe a moisturised tissue across her face. But it had a good clean smell, the tissue, and, automatically, she smiled as she opened the door. If Lewis noticed anything unusual about her, he didn't show it. He barged forward, his glance flicking straight to the table where there was a pile of folders.

"They've finished our pictures. Just wait until you see these." He groped into his inside pocket, where most men kept their wallet – but what was money to Lewis? He flung an envelope down then grabbed it back up as soon as it touched the table, his hands trembling and, he began pulling out some photographs. The stiff paper caught on the flimsy envelope and tore it; Lewis swore softly and Rhea was intrigued. Lewis didn't very often swear. He slapped the photographs face down on the table; she recoiled as though the slap had been for her.

Amber had sent him to plead with her, armed with more photographs of surrogate mothers. And these weren't downloads from the net; they were real photographs of people Amber knew. Rhea's thoughts raced on; Amber had joined a support group: that would be just like her, she couldn't do anything by herself. She had to have a whole crowd of supporters, whatever she was doing. The room seemed full of babies, they were packing the air all round her; she had to duck to escape them. The torn envelope fluttered to the floor; she and Lewis bent to retrieve it at the same moment and brought it safely back to the table, both of their hands carrying it together.

"I came straight over to show you." Lewis was back to those photographs; he was pushing them forward right into her face, too near for her to focus.

"Lewis!" She was gasping, swatting them away.

"Rhea, it's fine. The SA153's, they all stack up. We've done it." He grasped the hair at the nape of her neck and held her head steady so that the photos hovered into view. Coloured electron micrographs. "I've just got them back from the EM unit."

Rhea peered down as Lewis spread them out. She grasped at the table edge to steady her hands, flexing her fingers before she spoke. The photographs floated and swayed in front of her. She closed her eyes briefly, blocking out the image of those babies attacking like a swarm of bees.

“Open your eyes, Rhea,” Lewis said. “Look at them with me.”

He pulled out a chair and sat her down, pulled out another for himself; together they picked up the proofs.

Gold-labelled antibodies clung to the surface of all the SA153 cells, clustered around them, gleaming out of the photographs like uncovered crowns or precious torques. And all the others cells were bare, unburnished.

Only stem cells could sequester those antibodies and they were looking at the visual evidence, magnified a million times.

Lewis put his hand over Rhea’s, stilling its tremble. He bit at his lip, like a child, and waited for her to say something to him. The photographs shone on in the quiet light and Rhea let her gaze wander back to them: let go of the panic she had been feeling. Her skin tingled with the leaving of fear and the coming of relief. The air seemed crystalline then, as though isinglass had passed through it and cleaned away all the impurities, so that everything stood out clearly, bright-edged, sharp and true. A great and profound gratitude overcame her. It turned her weak with relief.

“Oh, Lewis.” She could see the same salvation in him; the same dissolving of a rigid desperation. The same tears started in his eyes.

“Thank God.” They leaned in together and kissed.

*

When Dave had left Rhea, he propped his shaving mirror by the basin, and then forgot to pack it. Rhea, shocked into tears, had stumbled into the bathroom uncomprehending, and she had seen herself, contorted and ugly, her humiliation magnified. She’d seen it again, creeping quietly home from the clinic. Hands and lips trembling, she had dropped the mirror into the bin. She’d had no strength left to break it, to throw it at a wall and destroy it, so she’d picked it up, opened the cupboard door, and leaning on the unit for support, had let it fall into the rubbish. It had settled face up, still looking back at her, reflecting her arms and the frame of her shoulders, so she’d closed

her eyes, kept them shut against the sight and held her breath while she dropped in a pile of paper to cover it up.

Ever since, Rhea had showered with her eyes closed. She would feel the soap around her body, inch by cleansing inch. She knew the knotty snags of her ribs under her breasts and the once strong - it's softening now - curve of her thigh where it met the pelvis. She could remember, in the slippery sweeps of her hands, the corrugated bones of her shins, the crannies of her toes and their blunt cut nails, by touch alone.

Now she felt her own body through Lewis' fingertips. Her thoughts were Lewis's thoughts; that was how close they were. His moans were the ones she made herself, his eyes looked for her, sending her visions that she didn't need to turn from.

This is me, this thinness, this transparency, the lightly worn sheen of warmth, as fine as gauze, she realised. Lewis lay on her as lightly as she lay on him. The same person. Breath came easily now, deep and steady. It might always be so.

Lewis was lying by her side when Rhea woke: on his back, his eyes open but his expression like a man deeply asleep. She was familiar with the vague ache deep in her pelvis, an odd comfort of an ache. She had often felt it after sex with Dave, the forewarning of the consequences: she was going to get cystitis. A white tide mark had appeared on the sheet: salt chromatographed from sweat. The steely taste of the cranberry juice, the changing of the linen, all the familiar post-coital paraphernalia: how extraordinary it ought to be; how bewilderingly ordinary it actually was.

The pulse in her neck throbbed blood to her brain, pumping up pictures of Amber. Rhea knew that she should feel odious, sordid, but she didn't. She only felt dazzled; a blizzard had obscured the universe. And what did Amber need her for? To be protected against, what? She had played the baby, had to be pampered all her life. A sigh escaped Rhea and disorganised the light from the door. As though she was still in school, chalk dust, dust motes, spun on themselves, tiny recollections, glinting recklessly through the years; the times that Amber had cringed behind, refusing her share of the blame for some misdemeanour; her way of prancing forward when visitors arrived, rooting out kisses and endearments, planting her promises of future returns.

The sharp edges of reality softened into the ungraspable curves of dreams. And the reality that was Amber felt a long way off. What Rhea felt now was peace: that some

fearful trial had come to an end; that a difficult and onerous quest had been finally completed. The bedroom mirror reflected the sky through the window, and the window reflected the mirror and its sky. Backwards and forwards the light must be travelling, in precise lines, with a vagueness at the margin that just took the hard edge off everything. If she sat up, she knew because she'd done it many times before, that she would see the city lights, the spine roads radiating outwards towards the suburbs, but she lay very still, unable to disturb the calmness that not seeing them brought. She held her breath, so that even that movement wouldn't disturb Lewis and jolt him out of his reverie. But perhaps it was the stopping of breath that alerted him. He touched her, unfalteringly now, with those same fingers that had felt like her fingers, but they were stronger, surer. They belonged truly to him. He interleaved them with hers.

"There'd be nothing without you. You know that don't you?" His voice was thick and hot.

All the things that Rhea knew became nebulous inside her. They lost their edges and blurred together. Without smiling, she gazed at Lewis. He kissed her.

"I'd better get home." He was apologetic; there was a sheepishness to his urgent buttoning and tying himself back together; he went off into the living room. Rhea followed him, draping her dressing gown around herself. Her skin was damp where she had lain next to him, the heat picking up between them. The central heating had been left on, the way it wasn't supposed to be when you were in bed. A shiver took hold of her as she realised that she was damp with Lewis' sweat and that it made the silk cling to her, so that she had to tug it into place. Even then, it caught as she walked, pulling her back into the bedroom.

Lewis was gathering up the photographs, stuffing them into his pocket, preparing to leave.

"Will you tell Amber," Rhea asked.

"Oh no," he answered. "She never understands anything about work."

Chapter 13

Amber had borne the winter with its eternal winds and sharp frosts, but it was spring now, turning into early summer. The confusion of rain and sun and unexpected chills made her falter. Driving to the clinic, she saw fronds of new bracken, uncurled across the moor tops like embryos, all head with their vestigial tails budding into bodies. Or they might have been question marks, thousands of them, all asking the same question. Amber was afraid of the answer. Because there was always room for deception, even if it meant deceiving yourself.

The staff wore green scrubs and, to give an impression of homeliness, white paper head coverings softened by sprigs of pink flowers. Nurses came straggling out of the treatment room, where they must have been making babies, with the same smug nonchalance that the women at Snitter Heugh had when they had been baking. Last one out was Eleanor's registrar, a worried-looking woman, thin with nerves. Thank God Eleanor will see me herself, Amber thought. She could trust Eleanor to tell the truth. Even so, she was panicky with doubt. The backs of her legs stuck to the plastic seat. Amber longed for clinic appointments, and then, she dreaded them.

She was sharing the waiting area with a shamefaced, young couple, applying themselves assiduously to the faded hospital magazines. They hardly looked old enough to have put in the requisite two years of fruitless sex before you warranted infertility investigation. They ought to be enjoying themselves, not going through this meat machine. The girl put her reading aside and cautiously raised her eyes, as if sensing that someone was thinking about her. Once she'd moved the lad put his magazine down too, and then they waited, sitting side by side, forlornly gazing ahead into the indignities to come.

"Not long now," the girl reassured her partner, just as the nervous registrar called their names, and they trotted off, guiding each other forward. The door closed behind them and Amber was left alone.

When she and Lewis had first come to the clinic, Lewis had mounted a campaign. He had burst through that same door, all business-like effectiveness, primed to the gills with technical expertise. He had analysed the entire system of infertility investigation,

first on the internet and then in the University library. He knew more about it than the rookie doctor. Amber had seen her flounder in his tidal wave of technicalities. After that, the consultant always dealt with their case, just as Lewis had intended. He hadn't known Eleanor then, of course. She'd been a stranger: stronger and more confident than her dauntless registrar. Eleanor openly enjoyed informing the self-assertive young usurper that, actually, she would be carrying out the primary investigations into him. Men are so much more straightforward, she'd said. So much easier, and cheaper - how she had enjoyed emphasising the cost - than women. So it had been Lewis's turn first. But how intractable their problems could prove. Eleanor had sighed deeply at the thought of what she might have to find out about Lewis. He would have to provide a sample, she'd explained.

"If you could give it to Nurse Evans."

Lewis had looked so sick that Amber didn't press for the details, but that evening, on the phone, Rhea had been scientifically exact. The magazines in reception weren't the only ones, she laughed, and made Amber laugh too, in spite of herself. Lewis wouldn't get any special consideration.

"And Nurse Evans, I wonder what she's like."

They hadn't been able to decide whether they hoped Nurse Evans would be a dragon or a siren. Either would be awful for Lew.

He had seemed quite subdued when he came home. The day that he and Amber attended the clinic to get the results, Lewis had taken his briefcase with him, packed with the same sort of care that he displayed when he was off on a journey. He'd gone into the consulting room his face a blank, but he had come out beaming. He had been pronounced Grade A. The little devils were teeming everywhere, thrashing and swimming about like good uns. Not so little either, big ones, packing a massive punch of first class genetic impetus.

Giddy with deliverance, he'd shown off shamelessly. They stood in silence on opposite sides of the lift, separated. For the first time Amber had felt that they weren't equal partners in this enterprise and now more of it seemed to be tipping in her direction. Through the prickly hospital garden and right out of the gate, the tests had released Lewis back into the land of the functional. Not only that, they had awarded him a certificate of

merit, while she had still to bear the brunt of the unknown. He'd careered off down the path back to work, pumped up with testosterone, leaving her to make her own way back to the office and to wonder what, exactly, Lewis's shock troop sperm count meant to her.

But Rachel Fenbridgeter had the answer. Sitting in her tiny office, so small that it felt uncomfortable to close the door, recently, they had exchanged frank, unflinching words. Finally Amber had understood everything. Rachel wasn't like Rhea; she didn't blank you with her knowledge, talking for herself as though you weren't there. Where Rhea was black and white, Rachel was sable and ivory, linked by subtle shades of grey. It's never all or nothing, Rachel had explained. If one gene isn't working, well, there are others that might take up the slack. "And," she'd gone on, inclining her head confidentially, "sometimes we don't find anything unusual. Now and then - there's no knowing why - the chemistry between two people just doesn't work." The idea of faulty chemistry lingered in Amber's mind like the laboratory smell Lewis didn't have any more.

She'd made the appointment and come by herself today. Rachel Fenbridgeter was on holiday and Amber had handed her urine sample to Nurse Evans with a miserable feeling of dislocation. Rachel was her person: with her there she felt protected. She searched her body for some conniving sign of change, flexing her shoulders manoeuvring her breasts so that they moved against the underwiring of her bra. Once, before all this disappointment, that would have made them tingle anyway, but not now. So much treatment had taken the edge off her feelings. At least the new regime had brought her back to some normality. It was almost a relief to feel ordinary; she had teetered on the edge, felt treacherously almost pregnant, for so long. The young couple was still cloistered; it must be their first appointment. They would be having the process explained to them, in careful detail, having their hopes kept strictly within the prescribed limits.

"Mrs Stamfordly, would you step in please?"

Nurse Evans sat down behind Amber, leaving the floor to the consultant. Eleanor was out of scrubs now, wearing a blue shirt, looking like an ordinary, middle-aged housewife, and scanning Amber's notes. She looked up in surprise, past Amber to the nurse. Amber twisted in her chair to see what Nurse Evans was up to. The woman must have indicated something because Eleanor broke into a smile.

“Well,” she said, “a positive test.”

A positive test? Amber’s tongue was poised between her teeth, but she couldn’t speak. Eleanor leaned forward, raised her eyebrows in encouragement, but still Amber said nothing. She knew that Eleanor was skilled at handling her patients. She would wait for Amber to take it in, leaving a space into which the patient could throw out all the years of sadness, the memories of those leaking spots of blood that carried your hopes with them. Eleanor deserved this moment; she had earned it; she was expecting it. But Amber had lived too long with the unbridgeable gap between longing and reality. She stayed high and dry as the silence stretched around her.

“You are pregnant, Amber. You realise that, don’t you?” But Amber couldn’t believe it. Hope and fear danced together, taunting her.

“But it’s only a test isn’t it?” There she had said it: the awful unreality of everything that was happening, this trick of technology. Eleanor’s face lost the glaze of understanding, washing it away in concern. Amber could see her own doubt infecting that calm assurance. Eleanor was unnerved too, but she was quick to hide it.

“The tests are very reliable. We have every confidence in them.”

She emphasized her confidence by closing her notes, drawing a line under the long effort.

Amber kept her gaze off the new nurse. Rachel, with her quick understanding, would have been sitting up with Eleanor, drawing her on.

“I was bleeding,” she said, “a couple of weeks ago. Only a few spots. I did wonder.” It was out in the open. Eleanor re-opened her file.

“Only a few spots? It’s not so unusual you know. I’ll tell you what, if you pop next door on the couch, I’ll have a quick look. Nothing to worry about, Amber.”

The nurse had the reluctant Amber popped onto the couch in no time, unwrapped and laid out on the stiff paper roll for inspection. But Eleanor’s hands weren’t in any hurry. She must have done this so many times before, it seemed as though her fingers could brush as lightly as the thistledown and yet still feel straight through skin and muscle and bone. Yes, she said, the womb would still be closed within the pelvic cavity at this stage, nothing to be palpated in the abdomen. Amber looked down at the convex curve of her own flesh and blanched.

“Can you tell?” She cringed from the all-seeing eyes, the all-feeling fingers.

“I’m as sure as anyone can be. You get dressed while I fill out the paperwork. We may as well get you booked in. If there is any more bleeding, straight on the phone, but, I think things are going to be fine, you know.”

Amber didn’t know. She had gained no weight, no sudden movement made her breasts twinge, she wasn’t faint, in fact she could sit bolt upright from a lying position with no effort at all, and she did it, there and then.

“You don’t think it’s just this new treatment that makes the blue line? You know, a false positive.”

The jar of alarm in Eleanor’s face was like being picked up and thrown against a wall. The relief at the sudden lift, then the crump of shock. Amber gathered the hospital gown around her. The worst was happening. In front of her eyes, Eleanor receded. Professional caution hid her like a thick fog. Why had Amber thought that? She wanted to know. Had Lewis given her the idea? Her voice tailed off into wondering.

“No, not Lewis. I haven’t even told him.”

The nurse had been listening, taking it all in. The drug company was paying her salary; she owed them their money’s worth. Out came her pencil, but not as sharply as Eleanor’s disapproval.

“If you would just go and recheck the test result for me, Nurse.”

The bossy nurse was straight to the point.

“I’m afraid that I have disposed of the sample, Dr Bonworth.”

Amber was promptly dispatched to produce another. The nurse would give her the sample bottle. As she handed it over, she explained to Amber that these tests were almost fool proof.

“Your husband would tell you. He’s in stem cell research isn’t he?” Amber was thinking that Lewis’s voice had to be echoing around the hospital, the way he was always being mentioned. The vision of the woman taking Lewis’s sperm sample from him and then meeting him later, going about his work, made her cringe, the way she would have folded back the record slip, stealing a look at the result. She probably knew Rhea too. Amber clutched the urine bottle close.

“You’ll only be needing a few drops,” she said and withdrew.

The nurse did the test in front of Eleanor so there couldn't be any doubt. She held up the blue line, the same shade as her uniform. No mistaking that authoritative colour, she might have put it there with her own marker pen, that's how sure she was. Nurse Evans was ready, with her notebook: the company record. But Eleanor's face was wary now; she was looking out for a pitfall, some problem that she might have overlooked.

"There," she said, bright as the kind of sunshine that shows up dirt on windows.

There were dark circles around Amber's nipples, and Eleanor had explained that was right, everything was as it should be. Amber couldn't think why she didn't believe it herself. Half way across the car park she almost turned back. If that nurse hadn't been there she would have told Eleanor everything. She would have said the unspeakable words, phantom pregnancy. The dread that she wanted a baby so much that she had imagined one into non-existence. But she couldn't say it in front of that nurse, with her dubious links to Lewis. The armies of his sperm swam before her eyes when she thought of his disappearing back as soon as he had his result.

Once she was on home ground, inside the car, Amber pressed her hands to her cheeks and felt their hot burn. Eleanor had believed that she was really pregnant. Next time she saw Lewis she would congratulate him. They might even congratulate each other on their success at getting her pregnant. They might smirk in professional complicity, taking the credit for their success. If it was really true. The absence of Rachel Fenbridgeter had thrown her off balance. That other woman and everything about her drug company seemed to make a pregnancy less possible. But if you took her out of the equation, perhaps there was a baby.

Amber touched the softness of her abdomen. Could it hold that uncurling life? If it did, she wouldn't let any of them take it over. A catastrophe of a memory reminded her that she had wanted Rhea to feel this baby inside her. A baby that was hers and not hers. She'd wanted that sort of phantom pregnancy. A cautious spangling of excitement spread through her veins. Now the tendrils of the new life were already clinging to her own body, creating a delicate gauze of connection. Flyaway threads of spider silk were stronger than steel wire; she wanted to go home and be alone to feel the strengthening of that net. She couldn't bear anyone else to feel her baby take hold of them like this: to trample this flimsy tissue of attachment. Not even Rhea. Especially not Rhea.

The picture of that nurse somehow finding an excuse to mention it to Lewis wouldn't go away, however sensibly she reasoned it out of existence. She decided to call in at the lab, but she wouldn't tell them just yet, not there. They couldn't have known already. Amber's common sense knew that Eleanor would never allow anyone to phone the lab, but her heart wouldn't quite believe it. And at the thought of it, the threat of a phantom pregnancy loomed up again. It would only be driven away when she had told Rhea herself and that awful surrogate business could be put behind them.

The lab door was propped open and there was a press of people around Lewis's office. Rhea appeared; the crowd opened, took her in and assimilated her. Amber watched as the bodies shifted back around her sister, seeing the tight shoulders, the touching hips that closed the circle and kept interlopers out.

Amber was confounded by the unconcerned backs, the wall of jostling bodies cutting her off from Lewis and Rhea. Lewis's voice was low, quieter than anyone else's. There was a hush spreading through the group as they tried to hear what he was saying. He was thanking everyone, lavishing gratitude on them, people were shaking hands. Some of the girls hugged one another. They moved apart.

"Amber. What are you doing here?" He didn't wait for an answer. He pushed towards her, "We've done it." Even as he pulled her forward, his gaze kept turning backward, reluctant to leave something, directing her to the desk. It was covered with the transparent negatives that he and Rhea were forever examining. They all seemed intoxicated; they talked too quickly, she didn't understand what they were telling her, but then she saw Rhea, watching with that old look of worry and love that she could remember from her childhood. Rhea struggling to smooth the edges of all the talk, so that it couldn't grind in Amber's ears.

The crowd splintered and reformed itself into discrete shapes, people that she could recognise: Katherine, Andrew and Joe, Fazil, some medical students. Rhea and Lewis were looking at one another in surprise, as though they had been propelled together from out of a dream and had to get used to themselves in the real world. Reborn and shrived, they had faces that seemed unmarred by all the usual disagreements and disappointment that dulled them. They had been polished so shiny that anything you threw at them would run off without a trace.

They made way for her so that she could reach the centre. Rhea gave her a seat, pressing her shoulders so that she sat down.

“It’s all worked out the way we wanted it to,” she said. Amber thought that Rhea could read her mind: now she was sure. The day shimmered in its perfection.

Lewis placed a hand on her shoulder, the lightest of touches. It might be like the touch of your guardian angel, and she, as he leaned over her, breathed in the true smell of him: only the subtle resonance of his skin, hot, excited, mixed with the soap that she had used to launder his shirts. She could feel the warmth of his body through her clothes.

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The lab was empty. The lab was full of light. It brightened the spots of colour: the primary red of the culture medium, the nursery blue of the reagent bottle caps, chunky, like toys.

“It’s so you can open them with one hand.” Rhea had demonstrated it often, unscrewing them easily with her left hand, pipette in the right. She’d always been able to use her two hands independently. Her mother used to turn away exasperated as little Rhea had patted her head and rubbed her tummy, forever showing off her party tricks.

“The trouble comes,” she would warn with fatalistic presentiment, “when your right hand doesn’t know what your left hand is doing.” All the time her own hands would stitch more and more fabulous pieces, once her husband had gone.

Through the glass of his office, Rhea could see Lewis, bending over the patent application. But would he see her? She resurrected the belief that Amber had clung to as a child: that if she couldn’t see someone, they couldn’t see her. She would sit in full view with her palms pressed to her eyes, convinced that she was invisible. Rhea played that game herself. If I can see him, he can see me. But she’d been too knowing a child to believe that. She couldn’t even pretend it now.

She closed her eyes against him, slowly, trying to blur his image through the interference patterns of her eyelashes, but he wouldn’t disappear. Instead he was clearer, nearer. She opened them again, fast, with no regard for the bright sunlight and for a moment he became only a dark shape against the window. But her eyes couldn’t help adjusting and soon he was back, all in focus again: this new Lewis, the unexpected

translucence of his skin, so that he seemed truly naked in his office. You couldn't think of Lewis without his work, they were so interleaved.

She could still hear the whisper of Amber, before she left. "I'm pregnant." The sound stayed with her, its refrain the background of her afternoon.

It was as though what Rhea and Lewis had done last night had made Amber's baby possible. Tears of self-exoneration swam in her eyes and she raised her two hands to the sides of her neck, pressing her fingers against her jaw as if to check that her head was still in place. She couldn't lose the sensation of lightness now. Wherever she went, gravity, that great warper of space-time, seemed to have no coverage. She had to struggle to stay tethered to the earth. Rhea dropped her hands experimentally to her shoulders. Yes, her fingers still felt what Lewis had felt. Something transcendent had occurred; something had been distilled out of her. Lewis had been inside her and when he had pulled away, he had taken something of her with him, taken it on himself.

But it hadn't burdened him. He looked unblemished.

*

That weekend they all went out for a meal, a joint celebration of the pregnancy and the project success.

"It's your success too," Amber urged. "It wouldn't be the same without you." The blunt edge of her voice hustled Rhea into compliance. In the event, Lewis decided to invite some colleagues along too, and Eleanor, naturally.

They sat around the table, among the wreck of the meal, saturated with superabundance: of food, of wine, of tremendous quantities of good fortune. Waiters whisked away the litter, the debris of the dinner and too many bottles of heavy, red wine, but they couldn't remove the feeling of election that kept them at the table, not wanting the evening to end.

The stained cloth was swiftly covered with one that was clean and stiff, starched into a wide expanse of wholesomeness. Lewis smoothed it with his fingers, settling it into place. He looked past Eleanor to Rhea.

"If we had one, do you suppose the company would foot the bill?" he asked with his newly-acquired cynical smile. He didn't wait for an answer, only shrugged, "Next

time,” and lifted his arms in a great orchestrating arc, right into the tray of a passing waiter.

Two Irish coffees, destined for a couple seated just behind him, poured themselves straight down Lewis’ back. The dark, perfumed coffee and the white, curdling cream, spread out in a muddy concoction across his jacket.

He leapt up, still smiling, and shrugged his way cheerfully out of the coat that would probably never be wearable again.

There wasn’t any scrubbing with torn-off wads of kitchen towel in this restaurant. The waiters fielded soft, absorbent cloths; they soaked away the mess. Rhea looked on, conscious that somewhere in the city, an anonymous, industrial laundry would wash those cloths. Every trace of the coffee would disappear into the underground drains, along with everyone else’s stains and that the restaurant would take them back, spotless. Apologies were murmured into the ears of the coffeeless diners; the girl sprawled forward, hands upturned in disappointment, to wait for the replacement. Then it was Lewis’s turn. Concerned words poured into his unconcerned, civilised face: no lasting damage visible there. How money mops up trouble, Rhea thought.

Other diners cast surreptitious glances in their direction, expecting to see signs of discomfort and a spoiled evening, but their table was a ring of faces all shining with the reflection of Lewis’s good nature: a charmed circle, impervious to ordinary unpleasantness. Lewis took his place again, in shirt sleeves, the coat spirited off stage. Coffee and yet more drinks appeared, slipped into their places by waiters who materialised out of the strategic twilight surrounding each table, beyond the glimmer of the candles. Amber had been here before, on her expense account. She told Rhea that it was quite the place to conduct affairs, for the discretion of the waiters was legendary; you didn’t notice them at all.

Hands toyed with glasses; there was a sense of expectation, a feeling that there should be a finale, the great something that would crown such an occasion. The colleagues kept their eyes decently on their brandy, warming the glasses, swirling thoughtfully. In the quiet, their expressions became reserved; they might have been contemplating their own opportunities, comparing them to Lewis’s sudden elevation.

It was Eleanor who raised her glass. “Well done, Lewis. We always knew you had it in you.”

There was a general murmur of approval, mixed with relief, at not having been the one, actually, to hand the crown to Lewis. Rhea caught the guilty eye of Stephen Glatton as he swivelled out of the loop, tugging at the neck of his shirt as though he couldn’t swallow properly.

But Lewis didn’t flinch. He half stood up, then with the tinge of worldliness that had crept into his repertoire, he eased back into his chair, ready to address them all, yet only leaning forward, looking down, then raising his head when he felt they were sufficiently attentive. He thanked them all for their support. There were a few quick flickers of interest in his direction as people tried to remember what support, exactly, they had ever offered. He met their eyes with ersatz conviction. If there had ever been any, it would certainly be withdrawn now, was Rhea’s guess.

“And it doesn’t end there,” he got to his feet and went on, swinging the beaming spotlight of his achievement onto Amber.

“My wife,” - he didn’t mention her name, plainly this was a further triumph that belonged mainly on his CV - “is pregnant. We’ll be having a baby in the New Year.”

There was a gracious relinquishing of the floor to Amber. Lewis bowed out as the double act came back into business - the golden couple, that fascinating circle of ying and yang. Congratulations were prettily proffered, and accepted prettily.

All evening Amber had been giving each of the guests her smiling attention, gift-wrapping her interest with diligent queries about their work, their home renovation projects, their families. Now she had her reward. She was the centre of unbounded enthusiasm. There had never been such a radiant example of a first trimester pregnancy. As far as his colleagues were concerned, Lewis had been perfectly eclipsed. And they were pleased at that. Lewis and Amber were busy, offering themselves up for public consumption, accepting congratulations, leaving only Rhea to notice the sudden falling away of the camaraderie whenever their backs were turned. She smiled fondly, as she knew she ought. Amber reached across and took her hand.

“Rhea will be Godmother,” she told everyone. “She has to be, and so has Eleanor.”

Rhea could see Eleanor, her solid frame planted firmly on the baroque French chair, her comfortable shoulders spreading out beyond the brocade back. She was laughing contentedly, seeming to be delighted with the whole situation. But no one had mentioned her part in it. Eleanor, without whom there wouldn't have been a baby at all. Lewis was leaning back, his shoulders weren't as broad as Eleanor's, the greenish brocade made a sort of frame for his shape and he looked as though he might be posing for his portrait. Rhea tried to catch his eye, to let him know that he should thank Eleanor. Perhaps, it was for the best that he didn't notice. Eleanor might not be ready to be thanked; it was early days. But Lewis kept gazing straight through the group out into the complicated distance of his future.

It was the intensity of his self-belief that made Lewis so exhilarating. Passion in him called out the matching feeling in her; together in their private world, they were a powerful entity. So powerful that she felt invincible.

The waiters had somehow brought the jacket back, cleaned. Lewis put it on, reversing his arms into the sleeves while they held it for him. Before Rhea realised it he had one of those arms around her shoulders, the other around Amber's.

"My two girls," he was saying. "What would I do without you?" Amber and her baby on one side, her on the other. Rhea felt the weight of his arm and turned inwards.

Amber hardly noticed; she was looking down at her stomach: her absorbed smile excused Rhea from any responsibility and the sensation of lightness increased.

Chapter 14

The space between his desk and the poster wall used to constitute the whole of Lewis's territory. Now, he took the coverings down - not because he suddenly felt entitled to blinds, but because he felt entitled to stare outwards, to monitor the progress of the work in the lab. A feeling of inexhaustible potential took hold in him, the way it did when you were very young, before reality cut you down to size and limited your options. The money and position that could accrue from this patent opened up his chances again. He felt he was standing in a high place where the air was thinned by altitude. In compensation, his heart beat faster, but no less powerfully. The same excitement infected everyone. When his researchers were working, he could sense the crackle of their synapses as the connections were made.

Right now, Lewis was hollow with hunger, but even this inconvenience was incorporated into the elation: the servicing of the flesh. If man could not live by bread alone, he couldn't live without it either. On the way to the refectory he had to walk past the photographs of the previous heads of department. One of them was rumoured to have only just missed a Nobel Prize. Just missed it in his sixties, for work he had completed in his thirties. Lewis was prepared to acknowledge that most great scientists had done their best work while they were still young, but that they might have to wait decades for the recognition it warranted. But he placed, with infinite tenderness, his faith in the patent system. Nowadays, the free market had dispensed with that lag. The world had to move faster and faster. Vic was back to finish the negotiations with the City Fathers. According to him, a chair after forty was scarcely worth having.

When he got back, Rhea was in the lab, working, and at the same time keeping an eye on his office. Without the barricade of paper he watched back: Rhea making a reconnaissance from her side of the glass, he from his.

He was lost in her. He rested himself in the subtly of her colouring. White skin, dark hair, made everything calm and beautiful. She stilled the jabbering world.

So many things had happened that they hadn't had a moment alone since Tuesday night when he'd been to her flat. The whirl of work and the celebrations had snatched them apart. A code of silence had surrounded what they had done: a relief at first, and

then a sense of a reckoning that had been postponed. He felt the agitating threat of stasis. The speed of all these developments meant that he had to keep moving; it was like riding a bicycle, if you didn't keep going fast enough, you fell off.

He went out into the lab and they were alone; for once the place was empty. Lewis had never had an affair before. It wasn't what he did. He was sure Rhea hadn't either. She was in front of him, the set of her shoulders was charged with risk. You could be electrocuted by just touching her. There couldn't be any turning back now. He pulled her to himself. She didn't falter. She just fitted into him and the bolt of nervousness was earthed. He felt for the cool respite that was Rhea.

"Not here, not now," she said but he knew that neither of them were going to put an end to this. There was no stopping anything that wanted to happen to them.

*

Traffic lights were squirting cars onto the ring road, but they jumped to red as Lewis passed them by. Bright sun flounced in and out of the clouds, giving him a headache. He blinked briefly and when he reopened his eyes, there was some runner, too arrogant to break his rhythm, grunting madly straight through the lights and careering into his path. Lewis jabbed down, jammed the brake pedal into the floor as hard as he could. The judder of the ABS was like a bad aeroplane landing, that rough and sudden thump on the tarmac - welcome in its awfulness because the alternative was so very much worse. The car stopped, the belt kept Lewis firm in his seat, and the would-be athlete was off, fingers in the air.

All the traffic stopped. The formidable engines grumbled discreetly; they weren't at their best idling; they wanted to be off, over the speed limit. Their owners vacillated between two equal desires: to keep them under control or to let them have their heads. Lewis's heart fibrillated, partly in fright, partly in anger. The driver to the right hooted; he lowered the window and shouted, "Up yours." Accelerating too fast, Lewis's Convertible leapt into the junction to a cacophony of horn blasts.

After the spiky disquiet of the streets, the smooth red walls of County Hall were soothing. The bricks shone red: engineering bricks, fired with the utmost care by Victorian artisans. The road traffic still whined and champed in its anxiety to move. Lewis stared at the solidity of the bricks and took comfort.

In the entrance hall, there was a cupola in the roof. It muted the acoustics so that each step across the floor murmured reassurance and distanced him from the mayhem of the streets. A uniformed messenger assumed responsibility for his progress, punching the entry code into a key pad, chatting to Lewis as he did it, his body turned towards his guest. Lewis could have seen what the code was; it wasn't a secret from someone like him. There was no need: he was to be guided through the opened door and accompanied all the way to the Council Chamber.

The spotlights for the photo session were already switched on, giving the dais the feel of a stage. As he walked past them, Lewis couldn't help but feel the tug of celebrity. Spotlights at his right and his left would merge into a single illuminated rostrum beneath his feet. The public seats, on the other hand, were consigned to a dismal obscurity because the windows were covered with what looked like very old and dirty net curtains. But as a breeze came through the open casements they flapped heavily and fell straight back: these curtains were blast protection.

The Vice-Chancellor repeated his usual platitudes, with just enough variation for the audience to be able to believe that he knew who they were. This was the University showing itself off to the City: here was the obligatory period of ritual boasting when the VC enumerated the achievements of the University, counting out awards and honours from a checklist that he carried within him. The embrace of his vision spread wide: the city had gained international recognition for economic regeneration projects that were paramount in countering the decline of its traditional industries. But obviously, not beyond the confines of the bomb-proof curtains because he spoke without pause over the hovering of a police helicopter that must have been outside the range of his hearing, but kept Lewis on edge with its irritating whine. At last, the Chairman announced lunch.

There were eggs, constructed from sausage meat, and mock caviar. It was always like this; nothing was ever what it seemed outside the lab. Still, faux authenticity was obviously good enough because the fanciful creations proved unexpectedly strengthening. Conversations began to spring up everywhere, but Lewis didn't know anyone near to him. He searched around, embarrassed to be alone in the middle of the networking.

"Lewis?"

One of the University Enterprise team was by his side. It appeared that Country Hall had a problem on its hands.

“I said that you’d have the answer.”

A circle of interested faces formed around Lewis. He looked back expectantly. Nothing happened. Everyone was waiting for him to take the lead.

“I’ll do my best, but you’ll have to tell me what the problem is first.”

There was a flurry of consensual jollity, as though it was thought politic to laugh at his jokes. One of the Council delegates, he was wiry man with an eager, thrusting manner, edged forward, taking it on himself to speak to Lewis.

“You may have read about it in *The Examiner*.” How confidential his manner seemed, for something that had appeared in the local rag; Lewis opened his face in surprise. “The dog that mauled a baby.”

“Yes,” Lewis had seen the article. His own wife, Amber, had been very upset, very relieved to read that the child - a little boy? - had survived, relatively unscathed.

At the mention of the words ‘baby’ and ‘Amber’, Vic’s antennae must have picked up a signal; he joined the group. The spokesman opened out to his audience. “We intend to prosecute the owner, but he is claiming that the dog isn’t a pit bull, that actually it is some Peruvian breed, renowned for its good nature.” The man turned back to Lewis. “What we thought,” he went on, “was that we might be able to prove something by DNA, but we’ve been wondering.” He paused, recollecting the wonderings, looking back at his colleagues for support in the municipally unmapped regions of genetic analysis. The question came out in an embarrassed scamper. “Dogs don’t have DNA, do they?”

The cheer and hoot from the crowd when Lewis told them that dogs most certainly did have DNA turned heads from all around the room. Lewis was off, back to his folder, fetching out the DNA profiles he had brought with him, just in case, showing them how to find the differences. They clustered around him. Lewis couldn’t resist the comprehensive levels of attention. Gratified, he delivered his undergraduate master class in the subtleties of genomic differentiation to an admiring audience.

Vic hovered in the background, an unspoken warning against over-confidence. “Thanks,” the Council guys said, as Lewis guaranteed no clear answers, but definitely, handouts on the topic.

By the time they sat back down to the negotiations there was a general air of end game. All that was left was to fill in the detail.

When it came to the celebratory photograph, it was to appear under the headline “Science Park Concord,” a gesture in the direction of hoped-for European Funding. There was a division on party lines: Council to the right, University to the left. Lewis made a quiet joke of it, then he had to give up his place in the front row to one of the lawyers, who was a girl, and prettier than him. He did it with grace and in return for his chivalry, she edged sideways and he slipped in next to her, which was a perfect position; she was tiny and made him seem tall.

He felt tall. She had to look upwards to thank him and as he acknowledged her, his eyes slipped further down to the curve of her neckline. Smallish, rounded breasts: not like Amber, not like Rhea. For a moment, he feared the risk that he might touch her, but it passed and he was left to move his eyes back to her mouth. Still, to be so challenged, and at the same time to feel so controlled, proved that he could accommodate excitement and calm at once.

He composed himself for the photograph feeling prepared for whatever might come next. The warm thought nuzzled at the back of his mind - he could always look down again.

He did just that as the young man grinned up from his lens and said, “Ready?”

The photograph didn’t come out immediately. The police helicopter with its upstaging whirr had been tracking an armed gang who had robbed a jeweller’s. When the raiders heard the clatter of the blades, they had taken a member of the public hostage. This routine bout of criminality pushed the story of the final steps towards agreement on the Science Park right off the front page, and the complication that the hostage turned out to be diabetic and in need of insulin injections, bounced it right out of the news altogether. In fact the whole episode might well have been forgotten completely, but that the University Promotions Department called in a favour and managed to get the photograph re-instated on a moribund news day, a couple of months later.

Amber cut it out of the paper, separating it from the beaming Brownies at their summer festival and the presentation of a book token to a volunteer librarian with thirty

years service at the hospital, and sent it to her mother. Stella wrote Lewis a nice little note, congratulating him, and phoned Rhea the same evening.

“Who was that girl with Lewis?” she wanted to know, and Rhea gave a huff of suppressed irritation.

“She’s just some woman from the Council. Lew was at a meeting about the Science Park. You know. I told you.”

But Rhea knew what to expect. Stella was interested only in her son-in-law. She had no intention of being drawn into some discussion about a Science Park. Instead, she gave a shrewd, little cry. “Frankly, Rhea, I didn’t like the way he was looking at her. You don’t think that there could be anything in it, do you?” Stella was at home, in Manchester, but Rhea could feel the acrid mist of her agitation in the room. “He looked much too pleased with himself. He was smirking all over his face.”

Her mother could detect the slightest waver of a voice from continents away. Rhea always phoned her early, before she had sipped even one drink in the evening, to avoid censure. She pushed her glass aside in a belated attempt to head off any discovery. But what did a glass of Vouvray matter now?

“What are you talking about, Mother? Of course there isn’t. He doesn’t even know her.”

It was true, but that alone meant that it would sound exactly like a lie.

“You can’t be too careful, you know, during pregnancy.” There was a delicate silence as appropriate words were sifted in Stella’s mind. “She waited so long for this baby.”

The tone of her voice made Rhea’s blood turn viscid. The delusion of Amber’s self-involved happiness wavered before her eyes. Lewis’s eyes looked away from her, saddened. Stella went on, “Amber’s always on her own these days. Whenever I ring, Lewis is still at work. You know what she’s like, she needs company now. She doesn’t need this.”

“What has she said?”

“She doesn’t need to say anything to me Rhea. I am her mother.”

No one ever needed to say anything to her. Just by watching you, Stella could unpick you like a piece of spoiled embroidery. It only took the memory of those glances -

looks tapering into the seduction of her mother's silence - for Rhea to feel the unravelling of her self possession. Stella could do that, even now. The Vouvray was back in Rhea's hands. She took a quick gulp.

"No," she said, everything was fine. Lewis was busy at work. "He'll have a family to provide for now. He has to make a go of it."

Her thoughts had to move fast, run to keep ahead of her mother's intuition. Yes, fine. Stella could take the photograph to her bridge club tomorrow, to trump some other mother-in-law's triumph.

*

"Some day these will be the most famous cells in the world," Lewis said.

Rhea began to keep a photographic record of the miniscule daily changes.

Potential suffused everyone in the laboratory. They caught it from Lewis; they caught it from one another, and then they existed in a daze of feasibility.

Existing in the moment was as much as Rhea could do because every moment of her days and nights had something to do in it. She clutched one of the huge 10 litre volumetric flasks that she used for making up solutions. They sucked all the warmth out of you but never heated up themselves. She struggled to lift them; the taps weren't quite high enough for her to manoeuvre such tall flasks easily, but she'd mastered the knack. She set them to dry, pristine, without the slightest residue of detergent to contaminate her cultures.

At the weekends, Rhea watched the delicious pout of her sister's belly and was transfixed by her happiness, amazed at the coherence of her view of the future. It was if they had exchanged view points. There was Amber, all plans and projections; there was Rhea, living in the present. She couldn't not feel Amber's happiness. While they were together, no one else existed. It was unexpected, the gratification of the instant and the boon that Amber was being so comprehensively protected by pregnancy: a pregnancy that Rhea had wished onto her. Stella's voice had shattered the conviction.

In consolation, she had - whenever he could - Lewis. In the suspended time between work and sleep he would follow her to bed. It started like a project plan because no audit trail could be left to lead its path back to them: a fifteen minute interval between their departures; cars parked at opposite ends of the building; duplicate keys so that he

could never be caught punching the audio phone outside her door. For Rhea it ended in an unleashing of the pieces of herself. They were flung so far apart she thought they might never be re-united. She wasn't sure that she wanted them to be. This elemental chaos was the most empowering and harmonious thing that she'd ever experienced. She moved from it to the lab, where doing half a dozen things at once felt natural, because the parts of her were so widely separated: never close enough together to let her wonder how Lewis got dressed and drove home to Amber afterwards.

She was faintly and pleurably tired. The row of clean glassware, the stacked order of her samples, the racks of tissue culture flasks, labelled, at every stage of their development. All of them serving to legitimise this failure of jurisdiction over herself.

*

There was so much excitement swirling around him, Lewis felt feverish. At work, and at home, everyone was pleased with him: everyone, even the builders that Amber had back, working on the money sink. Snitter Heugh was benefitting from ever more expensive renovations. Now it seemed that the spring-water supply needed protection from the local animal life. Gleeful intakes of breath from Simon Pindon invariably warned of hefty bills. However much he earned, it was whisked away on some necessity of country life.

Amber was going to want to know what the Pindons had got done while she had been away visiting Stella. He had no idea, because he had stayed at Rhea's flat all week. He thought of her now, at home, still engulfed in a haze of sexuality. Perhaps she was lying in a bath, feeling the water touch her skin. His own skin softened as he thought it and reminded him of Amber too. He fumbled with his briefcase; it held his patent application, almost completed. He could tell Amber it had been late when he got home: too late for him to go and check on Simon and Martin's progress. The trouble was, they might have been checking on him.

The station foyer was packed with jittery people waiting to pick up relatives. Amber's train wasn't due for another quarter of an hour, so he bought a newspaper and leaned against a wall where he could keep an eye on the arrivals board. He scanned the headlines but a nudge at his elbow made him put the paper aside. There were too many people about, too close, brushing up against each other. There was always someone on

the make, after something. A gang of hoodies was sniggering around the ticket machine. Lewis instinctively pressed his arm across the left hand side of his jeans where he kept his wallet, then he let it go, mortified. Probably that was just what they wanted; they'd know which pocket to pick now. The grey shapes, with their fox faces half-hidden, crossed the concourse. They were stalking a young lad, smartly dressed, who looked as if he had been to a job interview, with his air of having needed to please somebody. He turned and smiled ingratiatingly at a woman who knocked into him, and it was making him a target.

As the gang surrounded the young man he tried to squeeze between them, turning his body sideways but the spaces kept closing up. The victim was lost to Lewis' sight for a moment, hidden by a group of taxi drivers, gossiping with determined, turned backs; they weren't going to witness anything. There was a flurry, the lad backed away and the hoodies pressed on, pinning him into the corner by the taxi rank. Lewis leaned forward. For a moment he wasn't sure whether he was trying to see or trying to help, but he looked around him for a policeman, someone to alert. He started pushing between the streams of unseeing people, but before he reached half way across the concourse, the lad took out his wallet, a twenty pound note was passed over and Lewis felt himself hesitate. This could be a drugs deal, or a debt, or just bog-standard begging with menaces.

Whatever, it looked like twenty pounds was enough; the hoodies had decided to let the lad off. They slipped away, sliding back into the washing stream of travellers without leaving a ripple. Their disappearing act left the victim with his back pressed up against the wall. He wasn't searching around, or trying to find any help; you could almost feel the familiarity of the routine. This has happened to him before, Lewis realised with an uncomfortable jolt of something like shame. The lad studied the ground, conscientiously; he didn't lift his eyes all the way to the ticket barrier, where he too disappeared from sight.

He needs to learn to stand up for himself. Lewis was sure he would have done something - he definitely would have - if it had gone any further. As it was, he had probably done the right thing by not creating any more drama. It would have been worse for the lad. He was out of it now, on his way home. Funny, there seemed to be policemen all over the place suddenly, standing smartly with their radios, blocking all the exits.

Lewis folded his arms around his paper, around himself, and turned back to the arrivals board. The tinny voice from the speakers told him the train from Manchester terminated here: would passengers please be sure to take all their possessions with them. The hectoring tones singled him out from all the crowd of waiting men, homing in on him, so that when he caught hold of Amber, smelling cleanly of soap and shampoo, he felt a distinct and manly sense of tarnish.

*

The kitchen stools had been bought in the days when Amber and Lewis had been a fashionable, newly-married couple, without any thought for bodily comfort. They were elegant, minimal; they had no backs, so Amber had to concentrate on sitting upright. It was all she could do to fit her pelvis to the narrow perch. There were dirty dishes. The fine, clear evening light showed the stains of neglected spills on the worktops, but she sat in transgressive idleness. The baby shifted uneasily, accommodating itself to her tiredness, and bringing out a reciprocal burst of tenderness in its mother. At least phantom pregnancies didn't make smooth sweeps across your abdomen, reaching out from their world to yours.

They had been alone all day, she and the child, except for Simon and Martin. The builders had installed a solid metal cover over the manhole to the water supply.

"The cows won't be able to piss in it now," Simon assured her, stamping it into place. Beyond the field of cows, below the line of trees, she could see a dainty string of pylons, holding their cables at arm's length, as though they felt that there was something inherently distasteful about the discharge of electricity into the valley. Simon had commented on their fragility. What you need, he had advised, is a generator, for when they go down in the winter storms. You don't want to be without power with a baby. He poked about in the outhouse where she made her paper.

"It'll fit in here, no problem."

Self sufficiency seemed to be turning Snitter Heugh into a private industrial complex. All last winter she had sat at this window and seen the orange glow of the motorway lights, an umbilical cord that connected her to the city, and to Lewis. In the summer, the sun set so late that the lights never came on and she felt newly isolated.

The city was full of life. Rather than stay at Snitter Heugh alone, Amber sometimes drove down and roamed the streets. The traffic was heavy, and then children were blocking her way. They walked in a broad swathe, hanging onto the hands of sixth formers wearing red sweatshirts printed with a childish drawing of a house. It must have been a nursery school or something. Kids were being collected and taken somewhere to play until their parents had finished work. The teenagers could have been talking to one another, worrying about A Levels, flirting, or arranging drug deals at the local under-age drinking den, but they weren't. They took notice of the children, two or three each clustered around them, admiring their paintings, admiring their new trainers or the gaudy backpacks they carried their school stuff in. They were doing what they were paid for, those youngsters. If I went back to work Amber realised, I wouldn't mind my child being looked after by them.

One of Lewis' colleagues from the University watched them from across the road. He rushed over, dodging cars. It was four pm, shift change, and vehicles turning right were pulling out of the hospital across two lanes of traffic and causing difficulties. The man was able to take advantage of the jam and got himself across to reach the column of children just as they gathered around a pedestrian crossing. He bent down to one of the little boys, squatting in front of him so the child had to stop. The teenagers surrounded him, but the man still hunkered down. He began to protest.

"But I'm his Dad."

"Yes," the little boy agreed. "He's my Dad." But he had a glum, wary look and he kept one hand clutched onto the trousers of his designated carer. The big lad shook his head and ushered the child on.

"Sorry mate, we're not allowed to let anybody talk to them."

The pedestrian lights changed to green, the bleep for cross yammered over the car engines and they all moved off in a disturbed cluster.

"It'll be a divorce," Amber realised. "An absentee father." She watched the children go, their guardians glancing behind nervously.

There was a fly trying to break in through the window glass; the dinner that Lewis hadn't eaten was congealed on the sill. Perhaps it was tormenting the fly. A fly couldn't understand the nature of glass, what it was that denied it the thing it wanted. Her mother's

words wouldn't let her rest. *Take care. It's a dangerous time, with a husband*, as though men were inherently unreliable.

Amber decided that she would phone the lab. She didn't know the number. Lewis's mobile was the only one on speed dial at home, so she had to find it in the book and that meant getting off the stool. Still, what did it tell you when someone answered their mobile? They could be anywhere, couldn't they? So getting the lab number was worth the trouble.

The length of time it took seemed a reflection of the gulf between them; the sharp punches on the keypad like the sharp jabs of elbows, her mother's elbows, asking where Lewis was at this time of night. The lab phone had one of those old-fashioned rings that meant you could imagine someone wandering over to pick it up and holding it at arm's length while they finished what they were doing, not like the fast waver of a mobile, close to your body. She had almost decided to put it down again, when Lewis answered.

"Hello," he intoned cheerfully, with the high-low chord that was quite the fashion on campus these days. Rhea did it too; it validated you as one of them and set up a barrier against outsiders. But to hear him really at work was a relief, in spite of the intimation of exclusion. It made her feel a trifle foolish now.

"Hello," she mimicked, up and down, matching him. There was a pause, the length of time that it took someone to disentangle themselves from one situation and engage with another. She could feel the wire on the receiver recoil from the surge of the effort it took.

"I won't be long, nearly finished." The words came free wheeling down the line but Amber hadn't mentioned the time; there was an assumption of guilt in this unasked for contrition. The same assumption of guilt as when she had mentioned how late he had worked while she was away. Simon and Martin worked long hours in the light summer evenings, but they hadn't seen hide nor hair of him.

"Are you on your own?" she asked. Lewis's voice took on a note of surprise.

"Yes. Why?" There was a pause when he might have been worrying about something, "Are you alright?"

Then Rhea's voice came from further away. Has something happened, she was asking. "Lewis, is it Amber?"

There was a scuffle at the other end of the telephone; Rhea must have wrestled it away from him.

“Amber, what’s the matter?”

So Lewis was on his own: only Rhea was there. Amber shifted position, the baby stirred.

“There’s nothing the matter, nothing at all. I just wondered when Lewis was coming home.”

And that made Rhea laugh, just a small laugh, a bit too obliging. It didn’t feel right, that laugh. Poor Rhea.

“I’ll finish off here by myself and send him straight home.”

*

Rhea put the phone down. Lewis was obediently shovelling stuff into his briefcase, silent and avoiding her eyes.

“She shouldn’t be on her own so much,” Rhea said: an echo of her mother. Lewis agreed by a slight movement of his shoulders, but he trailed his fingers down her arm while he looked at the vials incubating, warm in the water bath, as though he might be about to let them down.

“Don’t leave them there. We can’t afford to lose them.”

Once he had gone, Rhea let her head fall back and watched the ceiling. She wasn’t even supposed to be working alone. Health and Safety Directives required at least two people, to watch over one another. No hope of sticking to the rules in her case; she would never get everything finished.

She switched on the freezing bath. The glycol shivered and began to move as it cooled. Sluggish eddies of oily liquid rose to the surface to engulf the vials as they were moved from warm to cold. Rhea sighed over them. There was a safety visor hanging by its strap next to the row of spare white coats. Although it was difficult to see clearly through it, she put it on to check the level of liquid nitrogen in the freezer. Once released from their frozen suspended animation, the cells would die. But it hadn’t happened today. There was enough, she didn’t need to fetch the container and fill it up. But you can’t close a liquid nitrogen freezer. You have to leave an escape route for the evaporating gas

and be vigilant. It would hold out another night, but she made a note to see to it tomorrow.

Tiredness was dragging at her; she tipped her head back to stare at the ceiling once more, the fluorescent lights were still flickering intermittently, as though they couldn't be bothered to gleam properly. She lowered the straw of vials through the narrow opening. As always the frozen water vapour swirled upwards as she lowered them and then there was a loud crack as one of the vials shattered and the cells scattered singly throughout the freezer.

She stirred the liquid nitrogen with the holder but there was too much condensation for her to see how deep the broken vial had sunk. The vial, soft and flexible in the warmth of the room would have become brittle as it froze. The cells, their mitochondria, their organelles, their nuclei containing all their genes would be spreading out, instantly frozen and dispersed.

Weariness settled about her but she shrugged it away. It didn't matter so very much, one vial here or there, there were plenty more; they were almost fireproof now. She lifted the visor of her safety helmet slotting the cover back into place and gazed around the laboratory, depleted without Lewis, gone home to Amber.

Chapter 15

Now that Amber's pregnancy had become a communal activity, Lewis was excused paternal angst. Almost everyone else was prepared to take on his share. Even the scan technician recognised him in the hospital corridors and gave him a special smile because she knew that everyone in the lab had installed the baby's scan as a screen saver. Each time he glanced at a computer - a dozen times a day - he saw it, that entirely hidden thing, hauled into view. The baby was lying sideways, tiny fists clenched, its vestigial body merging into the electronic background. Only the head seemed substantial, it was disproportionably large, as though the child might be some cerebral giant brought back from the future to torment him. It unnerved him, seeming so unearthly: the splash of white where the sound had bounced from the forming curves, the dark lap of the amniotic fluid, and the shadows of the flesh solidifying, taking shape day by day. The single visible eye stared out from the screen, unborn, but certainly formulating its advance at its father's expense. The screen pulsed with determination. He could never stare it out. But as soon as he touched his mouse the whole thing disappeared, the augury reverted to machine code, and Lewis could get on with his work.

The days stacked up, one on another, but they felt precarious and built on shaky ground: one tremor and the lot would be down. Outside of the laboratory, so many things couldn't be kept under his control. Lewis made a point of delivering the paperwork to the patent agent himself, driving to London with it on the back seat of the car. He should have stowed it in the boot but he couldn't bear to let it out of his sight. All the way it shifted and slewed across the leather; like the baby, it had taken on a life of its own.

In another glass and steel office, just like the one where he and Amber and signed their lives away to Snitter Heugh, the fingers of the accredited patent agent had taken the SA153 patent into their custody. When they removed it from him, and the whetted eyes of the expert began the evisceration of his document, Lewis's chest had clenched, and he felt such an ache of loss that he longed to have his destiny back in his own hands. He clasped his fingers tightly together afraid they might snatch it back, squeezed them until they turned white and then realised that he would get used to the grip of guilt around himself.

“You might make some money out of this one,” the lawyer commented drily. Lewis smiled noncommittally, uncertain whether it was bad form to talk about profit in a lawyer’s office. He’d come up against a distinct ambivalence throughout the University, but the agent openly fondled the possibilities of making money, feeling where the best advantage might lie. “Just a pity it only lasts the twenty years,” he mused, “but we’ll apply for a world-wide, next.” His legal expertise circled the globe and homed in on the US. Lewis had it covered. He bent down to his briefcase, pulling out the ready prepared list of American contacts, so the logic of the next question caught him unawares.

“Amber Stamfordly. The cell donor wouldn’t be a relative of yours, by any chance?”

The words were so unexpected that Lewis wasn’t sure he had heard properly.

“Sorry?”

The agent repeated himself gravely. “For the avoidance of doubt,” he added.

Doubt had been the very thing Lewis had been unable to avoid: not because it wasn’t true that Amber had been the cell donor, not because it wasn’t legal, but because it wasn’t common knowledge. He hadn’t told anyone from the lab that SA153 cells were his own wife’s. Now he felt a need to explain, to unburden himself.

“She’s my wife. She broke a tooth - it was ages ago - and I took the SA153 line from there.”

In his study at Snitter Heugh, he had inserted Amber’s name in the blank space left for it and rehearsed his explanation. Now that he had delivered it, he examined himself scrupulously: had he been too anxious, too fast to come up with details? All the complications and convolutions of his own life began to crowd into the lawyer’s impersonal office, destroying its accommodating air of sangfroid. The agent kept his eyes on the papers, moving ahead. He cleared his throat and the discussion flowed forward unperturbed, concerned only with legalities and the repeating of a professional mantra of caution.

“Well, I would advise you not to divorce her. You know that the US patent office doesn’t recognise Power of Attorney. It demands that all the parties sign in person. I’ve known ex-spouses refuse. Revenge can be very costly in these cases.”

It was all so matter of fact, as though he dealt with such complexities every day of his life. But then again, Lewis realised, he probably did. There might be nothing very unusual about what he had done.

As Lewis left, he turned to close the door and saw his file being slotted tidily away, as though there was nothing exceptional in it at all. The lawyer wasn't interested in his marriage; there was something so aseptic about his separation of the legalities and the personal that Lewis felt refreshed, vindicated even.

He drove home through a crystalline sunset. It was as though the air had been washed clean of dust and pollen. Pregnancy had cured Amber's hayfever; there would be no wakeful night ahead, no fretting and waiting for winter this year. She had never been so well. The lawyer's office, with its clear divisions and sharp edges, connived with his longing for simplicity to beguile him. When Amber had broken her tooth, he had taken the cells out of curiosity; he thought that dentine might be an interesting source, but he had told Rhea that they were old cells. All the fuss around Amber, her illness, her hysteria about the tooth, had made him wary of over-involvement. Rhea had practically taken over the running of his lab; he had only wanted to keep something to himself. He would have to tell Rhea, at least, where the cells had come from, but he could chose his time.

When he reached the village, the bus shelter was spewing out kids: the lucid air crackling with their racket. In the shadier corners of the village square, flares from lighters, urgently dug out after the journey, momentarily illuminated their faces: shadows sprang up to their foreheads as they lit cigarettes. Smoke and disorder surrounded them as Lewis crawled past. They watched him with rancorous eyes. He was sure that one of them would bolt from the pavement and jump under his wheels, just to put him in the wrong.

There was a lay-by a few hundred yards from the turn off to Snitter Heugh. Rhea would be up at the house, keeping Amber company while he'd been away. The thought of the two of them, together, turning expectantly towards him when he went in, it was suffocating him, closing his throat. He pulled off into the lay-by and sat still in the car listening to the clicking of the cooling engine: quiet but irregular snaps and cracks. He remembered the spare, uncluttered, legal office. Even the lab felt untidy and chaotic next

to it and Snitter Heugh, a baffling paradox. He leaned forward and let the wheel take the weight of his head.

Even through closed eyes he saw the glare of the huge full-beam headlights before he registered the unmistakable noise of Simon Pindon's flat-bed. It stopped right alongside him, blocking the road and he powered down the window. The Pindon head was looming over him.

"Problem, Lewis?"

The Pindon voice held a huge swathe of contempt. How it would love to have him at its mercy. How it would love to attach his Convertible to its monster truck and haul him out of trouble, delivering him back to his house like a lost package.

"No problem. Took a phone call, that's all."

The face beamed disbelief, even in the dusk.

"Busy man then."

As he drove off, the mockery of those few words made Lewis fume. The whole car heated up. He was a teenager again. His parents had sent him to empty the rubbish from a picnic basket into a lay-by bin. On top of the sandwich wrappers and banana skins there was a pile of wank mags and an empty gin bottle. The bin had been placed in the shade but a gang of wasps had left the sunlight and clustered around the open neck of the bottle, crawling over one another's bodies to get at the oily, alcoholic remains. When he'd poked at them with the edge of a crisp packet, they'd blazed up, angry and bewildered, but too drunk to find him and attack. A flush of excitement had coursed through him. The startling glimpse through this peephole into a hidden corner of adult life. Back at the car, Mum wondered if he was alright. A bit travel sick, he'd said. He felt sick now at the thought that Simon would surely be back tomorrow, peering from his high lookout, wanting to know what Lewis had been up to, hiding in a lay-by a couple of hundred yards from his own house.

The more he thought of it, the worse it became and he imagined the builders quizzing Amber tomorrow. She would smooth it over. Amber was fast on her feet, especially if any of the family needed defending, but there would be a momentary hesitation - she had been quick to ask him why the workmen hadn't seen him while she was visiting her mother. The Pindons would see that brief doubt with their prurient eyes,

and remember. Next time he met them, he expected to see this ignominy wielded as though they had won a victory over him. Lewis allowed himself a thorough dislike of Snitter Heugh and all its grubby ramifications. With the image of the clean, city office still plain in his mind, he wished he didn't have to wrestle with all the surveillance and censure of this countryside hole in the corner.

The porch light switched on. Amber and Rhea would be there, both of them expecting him: both of them knowing just how long the drive should have taken him. They were probably sitting together listening for the sound of his car. It had been a mistake to phone them from the services, he saw that now. It just kept him in their minds, when he needed to have been forgotten for a few hours. Even when he was alone, he was never by himself anymore.

A lot of this could be solved by a flat in town. Minimalist and impassive. Free of complications, because it would only be big enough for one. As soon as he thought of it, he started heading off the objections. No, he didn't want to put Rhea out by staying with her, he might be getting back late. No, he didn't want Amber running her day around his work, when she had a baby to think of. He could stay down there during the week, and come home at the weekends, a sort of holiday for both him and Amber. The separation of work and home life might be good for them all.

The track up to the house was rutted and dusty after the long summer and when he swung the car through the entrance it bumped and scraped the ground. He opened the window and peered down to see the problem. Mare's tails, primeval as though the past was coming back - or it had never quite gone away - had grown all over the gateway during the hot weather, hiding a deep gully and the front wheels were rutted down into it. Dried fronds moved in the night breeze, rustling against one another in malicious whisperings. He wanted the Pindons out of his house. He wanted his Convertible out of this rut. He forced the accelerator down, and with an sudden, outraged yowl the car leapt forward. The noise disturbed the roosting birds and they splashed into the darkening sky like stones thrown up by the churning wheels.

The door was open but the lights were off. When he went in, Amber and Rhea turned towards him with such wide-open faces that for a moment he could have believed that they both knew and understood. But Amber looked towards the microwave. A moth

couldn't resist the glowing LCDs; it fluttered around them, desperate to get closer to the light, bumping and banging on the metal casing.

"We were trying to get it out," she explained. "We put the lamps off and opened the door but it only found something else to attract it."

Lewis made a ball of his hands and enclosed the moth. He stretched his fingers as far as they would go, so that its wings wouldn't be damaged, and he felt it flutter for a little while and then settle in the warmth of his palms. When he walked out into the garden and let it go, he saw it shake itself out, make a perfect take-off and fly into the dusk.

He watched it for a moment before he turned back to the house. Amber had come to stand in the doorway. She put out a hand and touched him. Then he brushed against Rhea as he passed. Mother, wife, lover, sister: his body went forward in a confusion of feeling but his mind still turned the patent application over and over, testing it out for snares.

"It's done," he said. "I've handed it all over to the authorities."

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In the new era of his work-life separation, Lewis judiciously imported aspects of the one into the other. Managing expectations. Words that were bandied around the senior management team like a new leisure activity had a pertinent application in his home affairs. Amber was still under constant instruction from the Pindon duo; all the work they'd done at Snitter Heugh had made her an expert on building methods. She was keen to pass on their advice to Lewis for his own project, so he decided to let her see the new Science Park.

He helped her across the hot building site, holding her arm as she hobbled, big and unbalanced, in flimsy, new sandals.

"I'm still me," she protested when he suggested sensible footwear. "I'm still the same Amber. I'm not going to change just because of the baby."

There was a deep puddle left by the day-before's rain and Lewis stirred it with the toe of his shoe while he tried to think of a single, significant way in which Amber hadn't changed since this baby business. Brown, muddy stones piled up at the edge of the water; incredulity, scepticism and disorientation combined in his mind like all the colours in the

spectrum mixed together. She was looking at him anxiously, wanting him to believe her. Amber hadn't been this vulnerable ever before. Always, it had been him, needing her, and she would turn away, to sleep, without noticing. He probed at the myriad tiny wounds to his self esteem. Whenever anyone phoned in the evening, late when he was home, Amber would leap from her chair to answer it. The lack of decent mobile coverage at Snitter Heugh meant that everyone preferred to use the land line, but she never complained. Esmé had called last night, to offer Amber a dog: a wet-nosed, slobbering Labrador. With her eczema and asthma, it was the last thing they needed, but Amber had strung Esmé along, ignoring his shaking head and his deprecatory gestures. It took a note, a written warning, about the health risks before she backed off. And then she had told Esmé that she was worried about the baby, coping and everything. Just being at Snitter Heugh was a full time occupation to Amber; it used up all her energy and left nothing for him.

"Vic told me that, in the States, they keep finding shoes in the foundations of old buildings," she told him. "They used to think that people's souls were in their shoes and buried the old ones to lay their claim to the new land. We should put some in for luck." She looked down at her jewelled and ribboned sandals, "but I don't fancy walking back barefoot."

Between the shale and the jags of swarf from the construction work on his new premises, Lewis thought, blackly, that there were plenty of opportunities for damaged soles.

"I don't suppose there's any need for blood sacrifices nowadays," he offered into the undefined limits of Amber's intentions.

"Money!" She opened her purse and tossed fifty pence into the water and Lewis laughed with her at the aptness of her solution.

"Do you think it's enough?" he asked, "Fifty pence?"

Amber held her purse aloft and emptied it. A few pennies fell in the mud at her feet and she eased these last dirty coins over the edge with her toes. "We may as well be sure." She paused and linked her hand into his and said meditatively, "But a little bit of blood is definitely worth it if it works, isn't it?"

It was quiet; the workmen were at the other side of the site, so far off they seemed to be playing with little boy's toys. No one but Amber could hear him.

"I ought to tell Rhea," Lewis said, "before someone else does." The heat was drying up the puddles at their feet and there was a growing ring of white dust around the edge where Amber had tipped her loose change. She scuffed at it then angled her face to feel the sun.

"I can't see why not," she said. "I don't know why it had to be a secret in the first place. She must think it's funny, the way I haven't been inviting her up, or coming down here to see her."

Lewis watched the purse disappear back into Amber's handbag.

"She might mind about the money. She won't be entitled to any of the royalty income, but you will."

"Rhea won't mind. We can give some to her anyway; who's going to stop us?"

Legal barriers, binding agreements, contracts rose in Lewis's head; the threat of exposure, litigation, stripped him down. "Everybody," he said.

"No, nobody. Get over yourself, Lewis. She's my sister. I'll give her whatever I want."

Amber started back across the rutted ground. The tempered leather of those sandals wasn't as flimsy as it looked.

The new car park had grown. The steel skeleton was covered up with concrete tiles, but only in patches; in other places the bare bones were still protruding. The tips of the lift shafts pressed up into the sky. The building work was almost finished and they would soon move into their new laboratories.

"Do you think it would be a good idea if we bought a flat in town?" he asked. "I could stay there in the week sometimes, when I'm busy. And you'll be busy with the baby."

Amber was silent for a long time, and she sat down on a half built wall,

"No," she said, at last. "I've been thinking. We should sell Snitter Heugh." Her voice picked up speed. "We'll have made some money on the renovations and we'll buy another house down here. I've worked it all out. We'll be able to afford one big enough for a family."

The new pragmatist in Lewis already saw the way that things would turn out. He ran his fingers through his hair and was surprised – again – to find that he hadn't got any. But Rhea had been right: you'd never expect the grizzle to be so soft. He opened the car door for Amber and she felt for his hand, stroking him with a touch so sumptuous that it made saliva spring up in his mouth.

"I'm sure it'll be all right Lewis. It will leave you more time to get on with your work."

"You wouldn't mind?" ventured Lewis cautiously, feeling his way into good luck, testing that treacherous ground. But Amber no longer harboured reservations. She grasped forward.

"Of course I won't. Come here, you."

"Feel the baby," she said, placing his hand onto her bulging abdomen. A series of lively kicks pranced up his arm. In the flesh, in Amber's flesh, the child was solid and strong: nothing like the usurping changeling in the scan picture.

"Do you think it's a boy or a girl?" he wondered. "Why do you want to know?" Amber said. "It'll be whatever it wants."

Inside the car she pulled his hand upward, toward her breast.

"Even if there had never been a baby, Lewis, especially if it was you that couldn't have one, I wouldn't have minded that much. It's you I want most." Lewis could see the new laboratories behind her. Workmen were hauling equipment into the goods lift.

"It's all right. You're allowed to want something for yourself," he said.

"I thought I had you," Amber said sadly. "You can't want what you've already got, can you?" She examined his face. Lewis felt clammy with the fear of exposure. But Amber only smiled. "Once the baby's here, we'll be the same people again, Lewis. I promise."

He said that he knew, trying to fix the thought in his mind. Amber was firmly round; the baby was packed tight inside her. Her skin was calm and smooth, not flushed the way it had been when her eczema had been bad. Even with the baby moving around, trying to stretch its cramped up limbs, she was more in control than he could hope to be. He wondered if the baby felt it, and knew it, the way that he did. Amber placed kisses

onto his palms and lifted them to his lips; Lewis thought that his fingers smelt of coins, passed from hand to hand, grubby from use. But in his new work place, with Amber next to him, pouring the money away, it might only have been the metal of the car keys.

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Lewis could choose something from the bar's 'can of lager' range.

"But I can't stand the smell of it since I've been pregnant."

Amber's face hung over Rhea: the assured, spirited face that Amber used to have. And her sister was constantly attentive to her every need. "Which water, Rhea? Shall I order still or sparkling?"

She must want something, Rhea thought. She looked steadily at Lewis to let him know that she wasn't pleased, while Amber fussed over the water, exchanging sparkling for still. He looked steadily back at her for a while and then raised his eyebrows in a gesture of surrender and let his eyes slide away, helpless in front of his wife's exuberance.

The bar was crowded and everyone wanted to eat outside so they had only been able to find a table next to the footpath where passers-by were surreptitiously eying whatever they ate or drank.

"You should have come up to Snitter Heugh for lunch," Amber said. "I want you to see the garden."

It was summer and everything was at its best. The University exams were over, the students gone to their homes, or holidays, and there was a general feeling of release. This year, even the lab was quiet, and half empty as the equipment was moved up to the new premises. "You'll be able to get a sun tan this year," Amber went on. "And have a good rest before everything kicks off in the autumn."

Lying in the garden at Snitter Heugh, half-naked, with the rays of the sun pushing into every part of her, opening her up, was something that Rhea was never going to be able to do. She could feel the cradle of the lounger at her back and the drift of daisies, with its tangy sense of trouble to come, working on her memory, playing back scenes that shouldn't have happened. She might say anything, if she succumbed. But the seduction of giving in to relaxation was legitimate for pregnant, innocent Amber.

"It might be our last chance, you know."

“I was going to decorate the flat.”

Amber and Lewis exchanged meaningful looks. Intrigued, Rhea turned from one to the other.

“What?” she said. Amber put out her big, warm hand and covered Rhea’s. “Don’t do it just yet. We might have to come to stay with you for a while. I’m putting Snitter Heugh on the market.”

The waiter brought both sorts of water and the lager. All the questions that Rhea ought to ask welled inside her, kept tightly down because she didn’t dare to voice them. There wasn’t any way to ask, is Lewis moving too. Almost at once she thought better of it. How could he not be? Amber would get whatever she wanted.

“We’re looking at a house in Benedict’s Place. It’s near to some of the best schools; it’s close to Lewis’s work and you’ll be able to stay whenever you want, Rhea. There’s plenty of room.”

Benedict’s Place was well away from Rhea’s flat. She found how much she didn’t want her sister near to her. It was no surprise, yet it was unexpected. During the time Amber had been out of the way at Snitter Heugh, Rhea had felt only her own feelings: she hadn’t needed to consider Amber’s too.

Amber’s mouth opened again then closed firmly, as though to say, and that’s all there is to it. But Rhea knew better. Those briefly parted lips told her there was something else, but it couldn’t be that Amber had found out about her and Lewis. She wouldn’t be sitting by the canal with them both, talking about Snitter Heugh as though it didn’t matter to her, if she had any idea.

“Won’t you miss the countryside?” she asked Lewis. He didn’t answer until he had looked at Amber, checking for her opinion.

“I never saw much of it anyway. You know that.”

You know that. It drove a chink between him and Amber - what Rhea knew - a small but hugely dangerous chink. If she put her hand into it, it wouldn’t open up and widen. Instead, there would be a rumble and it would snap shut, trapping her.

Lewis opened his lager and Amber wrinkled her nose.

“Drink it over there,” she ordered with the imperious power of the mother-to-be. Without a word, Lewis rose and went across to the water’s edge where he stood rolling

the can thoughtfully between his palms as though he was trying to soften it. He looked back at Rhea and she knew what he was feeling: a guilt that was like too much light. It over-exposed his face. She could hardly recognise him.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” Amber announced.

Lewis started and exchanged a look with Rhea. But he was prepared for whatever was going to happen and had already decided what to say. Out it came, pitch perfect.

“I’m sure you two have a lot to catch up on.”

Rhea jumped out of her seat. She grabbed his arm and held him fast, digging her nails in.

“I’m sure you would like to hear too, Lewis.”

Amber smiled. “The thing is, we can afford it now, Rhea. Lewis didn’t say anything before because he didn’t want to worry you, but those SA153 cells that he is patenting, they’re mine. He took them from my tooth.”

Once the words were said, Rhea saw that she had always known. How could it have been otherwise?

The buildings along the canal rose from low to high rise in ascending steps. By the time she reached the University it seemed as if some pinnacle had been reached. The science blocks were the highest of all. Their walls soared from the ground like cliff faces, so convincingly that seagulls mistook them, and, creeping along the ledges, nested around the roof. Now those walls reared up, high, wide and white, around Rhea, crawling with a life that she hadn’t ever taken into account. Nooks and crannies that she hadn’t realized existed closed in on her. Aftershocks of thought disoriented her. She hadn’t lived the life she thought she had, she had lived a different past to the one she had believed in; she would have to reconfigure history. It felt almost as though there must have been two Rheas. The one she knew, capable, independent, working her way in an equal partnership, and another, the one Dave and Lewis had known, the same one her own sister knew, gullible, available to be used. She wondered which one everyone else saw, which one was the real Rhea. She didn’t know if she could ever trust her version of reality again. Standing in front of the department, she was confronted by her reflection in the revolving doors. Half a dozen Rheas highlighted against the dark inside spun away from her, then melted back into one as she pushed the glass and walked in.

Chapter 16

Rhea finished feeding the cultures, but she dawdled over clearing up, not wanting to face the barrage of questions that must be waiting for her. Coffee time came, the noise in the general lab filtered away down the corridor but no-one came to call her. As she discarded her gloves, the thin layer of latex peeled away from her skin, sticky and reluctant to release its hold. Face mask, hair covering, white coat, she dispensed with her protective clothing and went to face the coffee room. Katherine was waiting, watching the door as though she knew that Rhea wouldn't be able to stop herself from putting in an appearance. The medical student, that was no surprise, was prancing behind her, fascinated by the strength of her indignation. She's got an acolyte now, Rhea thought.

There was a rustle as something was thrust aside. Rhea knew that it would be Katherine's paper. She stretched out her hand and the medical student surrendered it, but with bad grace that he didn't try to hide. She turned the sheets over so that the authors' names were visible.

"I was going to mention." She spoke in her dullest voice; trying to appear neutral, positively uninterested in mentioning, but when she put a hand to her mouth, sweat made her lips feel oily. Shards of distrust, bright in Katherine's eyes, pierced Rhea. "I was going to talk to you about this, Katherine. It's all very provisional, you know."

Rhea studied the text so that she didn't have to see Katherine's disgust. A couple of typos had black circles around them. "I see you found the deliberate mistakes," she said. There was a snort of derision from around the room. It didn't seem to come from any one individual: more a team effort of contempt.

With the supporting crowd at her back, Katherine was unflinching.

"Did you know, Rhea, about the cells? We all thought they were bone samples." Bones, teeth. What difference did it make? They were both hard, strong bits of you, with something soft and living at their centre. It wasn't the difference between bones and teeth that Katherine was bothered about. It was whose bones, whose teeth.

"It doesn't make any difference, actually, where they came from," she told them. "You'll all get just the same credit." There was a shuffle of disbelief, an effort to square up facts.

“Lewis didn’t want to raise any false expectations, just keep everyone in work. He didn’t even tell me, you know.”

They all moved back to the safety of the lab. The equipment that had been bought with Lewis’s own funding had been packed and moved up to the new labs. All the stuff that belonged to the department had been labelled with a red sticker and left in place. Katherine began to pick off one of the red labels. She shrugged her shoulders and put on a disappointed expression, as though she wanted it known that she never imagined herself being forced into this position.

“I’ve applied for a job with Steve. I’ll need a reference.”

Stephen Glatton was having their lab when they moved up to the Science Park. He’d walked around it, touching things with a pleasure and a tact that Rhea had never expected. Katherine showed him the culture suite with a flustered pride.

“There’s a knack to the autoclave,” she’d explained as he’d pushed at the controls, shrugging when nothing happened. “You have to switch it on first.”

They’d laughed, privately together, and stopped noticing Rhea and when they turned back they’d been surprised, minding her intrusion.

Rhea went back to the culture suite and took Amber’s cells from their incubator. They showed no signs of ageing; they were growing, increasing. Soon there would be sufficient of them to ship all over the place. Used in labs all over the world. Essence of Amber, distributed everywhere. The freezer where she had broken the vial and scattered Amber’s cells throughout the liquid nitrogen was like a huge magnet. Rhea’s eyes were continually drawn towards it. A complete blueprint of Amber was swilling around inside it, thousands of blueprints of Amber. What would it take to re-assemble her? She opened the freezer and the liquid nitrogen began to vapourise.

The air darkened with the memory of Amber’s phone call and Lewis’s panic-stricken departure. Condensed water vapour shone in the fluorescent lights. It spangled in the air, sparkled, crackled then it was gone. Electricity arced through the laboratory. There was another burst and it sparked up again.

The vapour thickened and thinned, Amber’s face glittered down. Rhea recoiled and holding onto the edge of the bench looked back at it. The evanescent shimmer faded,

but the face remained. Amber, transformed from warm and soft to hard and cold. Accusation stared out from that face. Accusation and rejection.

“Amber.” Rhea called out to her, but the vision splintered. “Amber.” Rhea whimpered, wanting her back, but the spectre faded and disappeared, leaving just the frozen water, trembling in the atmosphere.

The team were down in the weighing room now, packing reagents, and the lab sweated chemicals, fusty and pungent. The freighted air pushed its way into her lungs, every breath heavy with its message. Something wailed inside her, deep down. It rose up and it wailed. It bubbled until it reached her throat.

Lewis was shuffling paper in his office.

“You bastard, you lied to me,” she bawled.

Dumb, he shook his head, pulled her inside and closed the door. She watched him flick through the file lists of his memory, then pull one out with an apologetic smile.

“It’s a pity to let the truth get in the way of a good story,” she said, because she wasn’t going to let him get a word in. Because it could only be one more lie. He leaned to her and touched her, an empty touch, a habit that meant nothing, nothing at all.

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Friday night and the bar was filling up with new students for the departmental fresher’s bash. Clumps of girls, basque-clad, tuffed together for protection, came crowding down the stairs and wriggled themselves into places at the end of Rhea’s table. They kept their faces turned down like shrinking violets, but there was a practiced nonchalance in the way they ignored the calls of ‘plenty seats here’ from the young men over at the bar. The girls shied off, turned their exposed backs and kept smiling at Rhea, feathery hair ornaments nodding amiably at her presence, thanking her for providing them with a haven. It was eight o’clock. The barman turned up the music a good ten decibels; a warning to the over thirties that they were no longer welcome, that their time had run out and the evening now belonged to the still young.

Tall enough to see over the heads of the eighteen-year-olds crowding the bar, Rhea pressed a path through them and found a gap, right between Katherine and Stephen. She squeezed in and Stephen shuffled a little further. The slight shift of his shoulders, the shrug of his leather jacket, not so very different from the ones she had just seen the

students wearing, but so very much more expensive, carried a presumption that he was entitled to the place she had just taken.

“Oh well done,” he said, with the patronizing tone she recognized. “No Lewis?” Rhea looked him straight in the eye. Her coup de grace slid in neatly between his primed up neurons

“No, he’s at the Vice Chancellor’s tonight.”

“Bugger,” said Glatton - probably his first honest reaction of the evening - and startled himself. Rhea laughed and he laughed back at the even score.

“I bet,” he said, “that Amber got him the invite.”

Katherine reached across Rhea and placed a possessive hand on her Steve’s arm. She shouted above the noise of the sound system.

“You know that Stephen’s been made Head of Department.”

He had the decency to give a self-deprecatory shrug.

“Safe pair of hands,” he explained. “Featly’s been made a Dean. Re-structuring.”

Katherine was rosy. A happy summer glowed out from her. She reminded Rhea of the girl she herself had once been. But Katherine’s eyes were too bright. In the dull light of the bar, her pupils had expanded so they could take everything in but they only saw what they wanted. She wouldn’t trust Katherine’s judgment, not with that wide-eyed approval.

Rhea’s purse was on the bar. She picked it up and re-did her lipstick, a quick slash of crimson in the tiny mirror. She always wore make-up now. No-one could peer into her face and find the sort of candour that Katherine’s openly paraded. She went out into the warm evening. The Science Park was visible in the distance, on the other side of the orbital distributor road. Lewis had been spun off from the centre with his five hundred fucking thousand pounds of start-up money. It wouldn’t last long. Soon he’d be running back to Vic, desperate for the next tranche.

*

Ready to be formally handed over to the fertility unit, Stella’s tapestry was hanging on the waiting room wall. Rhea gazed at it through a blur. She moved closer to hide the heave of her shoulders.

The foetus was floating in a soft blue lake; it almost moved as the breath fled out of her and brushed the delicate silk, silk so fragile that Stella had unwound the intertwined strands of the embroidery thread to make filaments fine enough to sew it. Rhea could see her, undoing the spinning that had given them their strength. The threads would have sprung back together, twisting into themselves to resist her efforts but she would have patiently teased them apart, again and again, until they lay separate on her lap. Her sewing room was white and the pale walls and the ivory furnishings would hold onto the last of the light, so that as evening fell, she could sit there and still see, while the rest of the house was lost in nightfall.

Rhea was thinking of her mother, the resigned tumble of fabric parted by her scissors, when Eleanor crept up on her, her approach masked by the noise of the party going on around them, so Rhea started at the hand on her shoulder. The uncompromising solidity of Eleanor's frame contrasted bluntly with the ethereal wall hanging; Eleanor's voice was unruffled, matter-of-fact.

"I've never had any children myself, only all of these," Eleanor indicated the wall of photographs, the babies who had been born because of the clinic. Rhea was surprised and she didn't know why. She couldn't imagine Eleanor, the fertility specialist going home to her own children. For one thing she just didn't look tired enough. She had never really thought of Eleanor outside of the clinic, of the finite nature of her dreams: the gradual attrition of her own desires by the demands of work.

"Did you...?" she hesitated, it wasn't something you should ask but Eleanor answered anyway. "I can hardly remember now. It's just how things turned out."

She was smiling an uncomplicated smile. Rachel Fenbridgeter came to join her and they began to talk about the new drug project: Amber their first success.

"So it's not just a baby that Amber has got, it's a cell line too."

They all gazed across the room to where Amber was chatting to Stella. Multiple images of the two of them would stretch down the years.

Eleanor and the nurse were watching her, waiting for Rhea to say something. Tugging at her mind was a half memory of the question they had asked that led to this stasis. Eleanor must have been repeating it.

"The tooth?"

“A molar,” Rhea answered. She saw it again, the pomegranate seed, with its biblical fecundity: the teeming seeds merged with the teeming copies of Amber’s genome in the cell line. And pomegranate was Amber’s private medicine. She wondered if Eleanor had ever known about her patient’s supplementary treatments or if they had been a private affair between Amber and Rachel Fenbridgeter.

Even while she thought about it, she realized. It didn’t hit her all at once. There was no kaleidoscope pattern that clicked into symmetry: only the slowing of something that had roiled below the surface of her mind so that there was no shock of discovery, only the calm of understanding. When Amber had broken her tooth she had been on fertility drugs. The balance of probability was that they were the reason that SA153 had been so successful.

There was more shock in the next thought. If that was the case, the drug company would be entitled to its share. More than that, it would be voracious for it, with the entire apparatus of the patent system on its side. Rachel Fenbridgeter chatted on, oblivious. Rhea let her, not sure if it was the baby Amber was carrying or the representation on the tapestry that occupied her; they merged in the enthusiasm of her admiration of all things connected to Amber.

“Come and meet mother.”

Stella was at the centre of a semicircle of admirers, of herself or her tapestry, she had never seemed to mind and more were always welcome. Rhea drifted off towards the edge. There was an alcove, she leaned against the wall. All around her the congratulations went on, waves and waves of warm, billowing talk, and Rhea had an uncomfortable impression of herself as the gap through which all the overheated, displaced air could escape into a different world.

Lewis was wagging a wine glass, rocking the stem between his fingers, oblivious of the risk he was running. He had held up the vial of SA153’s that he had discovered in the freezer, scruffy with age and waggled it in his fingers just like that. But it hadn’t been an old vial; it had been a new one, put there the day Amber had been to the dentist. If it looked old, Lewis must have deliberately aged it. He must have scratched at the marker pen label with his fingernails, to disguise it. He must have written the wrong date on it, deliberately. A date well before Amber’s fertility treatment.

Lewis downed the cheap wine with a sour expression and picked up another glass. Stephen Glatton was watching them but she didn't care who saw; she took Lewis out onto the landing.

"I know what you've done with the patent."

"Lovely, don't say anything here, someone might hear. We should go back in; we'll go over this in my office, in private."

"Oh, don't worry," said Rhea, "They'll only think we're off having a fuck."

"We're just getting some cool air," he told her. "No one can prove it. Just deny everything."

There would be a trail, a weak one, but if anyone thought to look at the lab records, they would see that the SA153 had been all used up and want to know where the extra vial had come from. No, Lewis would have changed those records already. He would have pulled the page from the record file and slipped in a new one.

"The dentist's appointment book," she said. "What are you going to do about that?"

Lewis shrugged and centered his gaze through the window, towards the city. Rhea looked over the handrail, down the deep stairwell to the ground floor.

"It might not have made any difference at all. Why should anyone look? Don't exaggerate, Rhea, for God's sake, and don't say anything to Amber, just don't do it. There's no need for her to have anything more to worry about."

The hospital establishment had strung safety nets from the landing on every floor, so no one could fall to the concrete below. One of the fastenings had come adrift. You might plunge through it, but the net below would hold you. Lewis might be right; perhaps the results would be repeatable with any sample. Sometimes it happened like that. Things just came into their own. You'd had enough practice, everything was in place. But she didn't think so. Lewis would have this to worry about for the rest of his life because it was his name on the patent.

Don't tell Amber, he had said. The noise of the party was an irrelevant but comforting background, like the traffic in your street through a wakeful night. It occurred to Rhea, standing on the bare landing, that she knew now what the transcendental thing that Lewis had brought about in her was.

She recognized what he had lifted away from her. Amber.

Responsibility for Amber had been assumed by him. Lewis gave her a kiss, one that anyone could see: a peck of affection that they would believe was for his sister-in-law. But Rhea could feel the goodbye placed on her cheek, because he had already gone, that exciting young Lewis. There would never be a time in the future when he would come back, trembling and raw and say to her, shall we? For old times sake? Wanting to recapture his youth. His eyes were crinkled, like someone staring into the horizon anticipating trouble. He needed a shave. A dark shadow of growth covered his cheeks and jaw, joining the grizzle on his head. Lewis bore the trademark designer stubble of the middle-aged academic. Rhea could see it plainly; Lewis already hurrying into the thin-skinned and grey man he would have to be, twenty years down the line.

There had been such a lot of wrongs; they might have cancelled each other out. Eleanor had her own life. Lewis would be absorbed into Amber. Amber would be absorbed into Lewis. She thought that she understood them now. Understood how difficult it had been for them all. She wondered if they felt the same about her.

New challenges pressed their claims. Rhea already had her airline ticket back to the US. She could let the flat, sell the coupe.

Lewis was agitated, so she led him back into the party. A few people turned to look at them, smiled and made room for them both. It might be oddly painless, this rebirth.

Transforming Science into Story: Breath on Glass.

Introduction

'The cutting edge of research' is an apt term. Freshly honed knowledge is sharp and it can lacerate both the discoverer and the society which must grasp its implications. Contemporary science has provided much for society to assimilate. Modern reproductive technologies, with their emphasis on cloning, the repetition of the individual and the displacement of the biological parent have provided unprecedented attacks on our understanding of biological inheritance. The recent confirmation of gene imprinting, the process whereby certain life events of the parent (for example, nutritional status¹) have been shown to influence the health of subsequent generations by means of alterations in their genetic inheritance, has given a new twist to the atavistic fear that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. Organ transplantation and stem cell therapies have provoked disagreements as to the ownership of bodies and our concepts of individuality. At the same time, these same medical advances have brought profound benefits.

'Stories are medicine'² claims Estes, a Jungian psychoanalyst. She describes the telling of powerful stories as 'handling archetypal energy'.³ Vetlesen, on the other hand, discusses the use of story to sustain ethnic hatred and so encourage the perpetration of the horrific war crimes that have marred the twentieth century,⁴ suggesting that narrative cannot be considered to possess an intrinsic morality; ethical position is a reflection of that of the human operator. I would suggest the same for science. Fiction has often been exploited to reconcile the differences between science and society, sometimes increasing the anxieties raised by science's apparent confrontation with nature and religion - Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*⁵ has become a byword for all that is fearful about unfettered knowledge - and sometimes allaying these same anxieties, as in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*⁶, where Henry Perowne uses his knowledge of neurophysiology both to alleviate and understand aberrant behaviour.

1. G. Kaati et al. 'Cardiovascular and diabetes mortality determined by nutrition during parents' and grandparents' slow growth period', *Eur J Hum Genet*, 10 (2002) pp. 682-8.

² C.P. Estes, *Women who Run with the Wolves* (London: Random House, 1992) p. 466.

³ C.P. Estes, *Women who Run with the Wolves* (London: Random House, 1992) p. 470.

⁴ A.J. Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 131-133.

⁵ M. Shelley, *Frankenstein* this edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co. 1996).

⁶ I. McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

Science is a matter for everyone; its effects on the way we live are too far reaching for it to be the preserve of scientists alone. My story, *Breath on Glass*, is an attempt to show scientists as ordinary human beings in action and to demystify the scientific process.

Breath on Glass has three major protagonists: each of them wants something. Lewis, a research leader, desperately needs more funding to continue his work. Rhea, his senior lieutenant, wants independence, a team of her own. Amber, Rhea's sister and Lewis's wife, wants a baby.

Inside almost every human cell is a blueprint of the entire body: a complete person lurks, dormant. A liver cell, for example, 'knows' how to be an eye, or a nerve or the tip of a tongue. A great deal is becoming known about the way in which the pluripotent cells of the early embryo become differentiated, the chemical instructions that turn a fertilised egg into a baby, but there is a still-unclaimed prize for the scientist who can return an adult cell to its early embryonic state. While Amber would move heaven and earth to create a baby, her husband and sister would move heaven and earth to reverse engineer the same process. The tension between these states forms the basis for the plot of *Breath on Glass*.

The creation of a baby has all the joy, anguish and interpersonal manipulation associated with human sexuality. The creation of a stem cell line has all the excitement, disappointments, and exultation associated with the mastery of the very elements of life. These two processes are normally approached by distinct courses of action. Amber, in attempting to create her family, uses the same biological tools that a scientist such as Darwin would have employed. She can see, touch and hear and therefore try to understand what is happening around her through her own senses. Lewis and Amber, post-Darwinian scientists, cannot experience their work at first hand. They will never be able to see, touch, or hear what they do. They experience their work through the agency of equipment. Microscopes, radioactive markers, analysers and electrophoresis systems extend their natural senses, so that they can detect things beyond their physical limits and exert control over things that are outside of their direct experience.

Daniel Smail suggests disparate experiences may produce disparate brain patterns, saying:

...The Neolithic transformationbrought about the conditions necessary for a rapid increase in the range of economic, political, and social devices that serve to modulate the body states of self and others.....These devices range from religious liturgies, sports, education, novel reading and military training...⁷

I am adding the pursuit of science to Smail's list. Different ways of looking at things produce antipathies and these provide narrative drive. While Amber is manoeuvring closer and closer contact between the protagonists, Lewis and Rhea need more and more space around themselves. While the scientists feel an increasing power over nature, Amber is held in deeper thrall to her own unfulfilled biological imperatives. Amber's body proves insufficient for her purposes; it is through reproductive science that she achieves her heart's desire. Lewis and Rhea's science proves insufficient to fulfil their ambitions. Lewis needs humanity to keep his team around him. Rhea must find a way to blend the two sides of life, and to survive with her own individuality intact. The strands of their lives, like DNA are entwined. For progress to be made they must disentangle; the bonds must be broken and be reassembled in new patterns that will reflect their different natures and experiences but still remain whole and viable.

I chose the field of stem cell research for my novel because I did some early work in cellular differentiation myself and it is a sample of my own methodologies that I describe in the novel. But in using my scientific work as the basis for a novel and to explore the human dimension of the scientific process, I have attempted to meld scientific and literary discourses that have been subject to separate development. This essay will consider the historical separation of literature and science, the approaches of some contemporary writers to using science in their work and the ways in which I have blended my scientific experience into my own novel.

Aspects of Literature as a Mediator of Science

This section forms a brief exploration of the impact of science on literature and society from a historical and contemporary perspective.

Although patentable science is invariably novel, novels are not. The prelude to *Breath on Glass* is couched in modernist, scientific terms, describing the current state of

⁷ D.L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2008) pp. 117-118.

knowledge about the beginning of an individual human life. It uses the concept that the egg contains two sets of maternal DNA,⁸ one of which will become joined with the paternal DNA to form the new individual and the other of which will disintegrate, as a allegory for the tensions between the two sisters in the novel.

You have to wonder how it is for that spare set of maternal DNA, disintegrating in the zona pellucida. It might have been you, but as it is, there's just this ghost inside you, the person that you might have been.⁹

The oldest written story that we have, *Gilgamesh*¹⁰, is just such a tale of the struggle between the two natures of one individual. Science may constantly launch assaults upon the assumptions we make about ourselves, but literature has long reflected, and therefore, either contained or unleashed, human hopes and fears.

The publication of Charles Darwin's theory about the origin of species set science against religious authority and the Victorian certainty of man's natural supremacy in nature. Its ideas were widely disseminated and rapidly absorbed into contemporary fiction. Victorian novelists considered the issues; they incorporated the principles of evolutionary development in their work.¹¹ George Eliot, herself an amateur zoologist, reflected these concepts in her novels and, notably, the reasoning of characters such as Dr Lydgate who embraced the scientific ethos.¹²

The *Zeitgeist* has a way of inveigling itself into the most unlikely places. It is absorbed consciously, or unconsciously, and makes itself felt in unexpected ways. In a climate of rationalism and order, Emily Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights*, that saga of unreason and chaos. Yet Stevie Davies has identified the ideas of genetic inheritance as being a 'governing principle of the novel'¹³ and points to the contrasting of the human and canine life histories as evidence of the author's understanding of the shared nature of human and animal development.

⁸ I. Wilmot, K. Campbell and C. Tudge, *The Second Creation* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001) pp. 118-119.

⁹ *Breath on Glass* p. 7.

¹⁰ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ed. A. George, (London: Penguin Classics, Penguin Group, 2003).

¹¹ G. Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth Century Fiction* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) p. 8.

¹² T. Cosslett, *The Scientific Movement and Victorian Literature* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982) pp. 74-100.

¹³ S. Davies, *Emily Brontë: Heretic* (London: The Women's Press Ltd. 1994) p. 114.

Science has moved inexorably onward and the offence to our former self-confidence has largely been overcome. Our self-perceptions are now being informed by an unprecedented awareness of what it is to be a biological human.

Tess Cosslett¹⁴ notes Tennyson's *Two Greetings*, a poem to his new-born son, in which he describes the period between conception and birth as 'nine long months of antenatal gloom.' No contemporary poet who has seen the tender and wonder-filled films of pre-natal life could speak of antenatal gloom as the prelude to birth. We have now seen what, hitherto, nature had concealed from us. In this transgressive glimpsing of the unborn we have perhaps seen the future and a contemporary writer – and contemporary characters¹⁵ – must work within this expanding frame of reference.

During the nineteenth century scientists and poets were in close companionship. Tess Cosslett indicates that Tennyson's association with Tyndall and Huxley may explain the influence of contemporary scientific thinking on his poetry,¹⁶ but it is less likely that poets and scientists would be closely linked in the present world, although they sometimes are in story.¹⁷ The systematic nature of education and the sheer weight of the necessary learning have separated the two professions so thoroughly that in 1959 CP Snow delivered his famous lecture "The Two Cultures"¹⁸ in which he asserted that the humanities and science no longer understood one another.

The debate continues to this day and it is true that separate discourses have arisen: canons of language that are intimidating and protectionist, making it difficult to maintain relationships across this culture gap. This is a significant insult to a coherent society. We need both our scientists and our humanitarians because it is essential that we should achieve a consensus in the application of technology. The recent enquiry into the retention of the organs of dead children in NHS hospitals laid bare the risks of leaving scientists to make decisions without the fully informed consent of both patients and the general public. Professor Brazier, the Chair of the NHS Retained Organs Commission,

¹⁴ T. Cosslett, *The Scientific Movement and Victorian Literature* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982) p. 41.

¹⁵ See *Breath on Glass* p. 190.

¹⁶ T. Cosslett, *The Scientific Movement and Victorian Literature* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982) pp. 39-73.

¹⁷ See, for example, I. McEwan, *Enduring Love* this edition (London: Vintage Books, 1997) and A. Goodman, *Intuition* this edition (London: Atlantic Books, 2010).

¹⁸ C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* this edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

makes her position plain. Her work with the families affected by this situation has informed her arguments in favour of greater consideration being given to the view of the individual and their families, saying:

The dead infant, the wife succumbing to breast cancer at 35, the elderly father dying suddenly of a heart attack do not change their nature for their mother, husband or daughter. They remain Susannah, Lucy and Dad.....Mutilation of that body becomes a mutilation of that image. Reason may tell the family that a dead child could not suffer when organs were removed. Grief coupled with imagination may overpower reason.¹⁹

When the professional group holds command of the decision-making there is always the risk that this coterie will become self-referential and that its interests will be accorded precedence. This prospect informs the title of my novel, *Breath on Glass*, and is illustrated in the scene where, as the scientists congratulate themselves on their success, their own condensed breath obscures their view of the outside world.²⁰ Knowledge must be a servant of humanity rather than a master and reason is not the only human factor that should influence its application. Here literature can take a view that science, medicine, political thought and the law have found paradoxical. It can provide a human dimension to the unfamiliar and remind the professional that valid opinion is not a prerogative of the initiate. It is with these divisions in mind that I searched for scientific and emotional consensus in my novel.

Other contemporary writers have used science as a seed crystal in their work. Ian McEwan's *A Child in Time*²¹ explores the concepts of memory and the mutability of time, particularly in relation to childhood. Ostensibly this novel is a story of a lost child. As the protagonist, Stephen, a children's author, searches for his lost daughter, he encounters his own past. Language and imagery are strongly linked to the theme of the mutability of time, the persistence of the past in all of us. As Stephen leaves the station to visit his estranged wife, he watches the train 'slip through the frail proscenium of signals and, foreshortened, click slowly out of sight round a curve'²², an image strongly

¹⁹M. Brazier, 'Retained Organs: Ethics and Humanity', *HeinOnline Legal Stud.* 22 (2002), 550-569 (pp. 561-562).

²⁰ *Breath on Glass* p. 128.

²¹ I. McEwan, *A Child In Time* this edition (London: Vintage Books, 1987)

²² I. McEwan, *A Child In Time* this edition (London: Vintage Books, 1987) p. 51.

associated with the Theory of Relativity. Some of Stephen's past is lost. Destroyed by the loss of the child, his marriage seems over and he can't remember the names of the friends whose wedding gift was the marriage bed,²³ but some of his history is still in existence. As he travels to visit his estranged wife, he walks into his own origins: his mother telling his father that she is pregnant. The novel explores a human dimension of the way we live in time, informed by science. The characters live in a relativistic world, struggling to integrate their pasts and presents and confused about their futures.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*²⁴, like *A Child in Time*, is set in the not-too-distant future. The currently emerging technologies of cloning and transplantation are commonplace and the novel is a particularly haunting exploration of the loss of humanity made possible in the application of technology. Incrementally, as the children themselves realise it, the reader is edged towards the knowledge that the human and engaging characters are clones, created to serve as transplant donors, and not considered by society to be human at all. Without ever mentioning the laboratory, Ishiguro leads us into science's worst excesses, presented to the reader and the characters as normality.

Allegra Goodman's novel, *Intuition*,²⁵ however, like *Breath on Glass*, uses a laboratory setting and deals explicitly with scientific fraud. This work describes the relationships between ambitious scientists working in a team, headed by a reticent female scientist, Marion, and an exuberant medical practitioner, Sandy. A cancer-related project, pursued by one of the laboratory's postdoctoral workers, becomes dramatically and unexpectedly successful. This leads to an accusation of scientific fraud: that the scientist concerned secretly disposed of some mice which were not cured of cancer by his R-7 virus, in order to improve the apparent efficacy of the treatment. The plot examines the effect of the ensuing investigation on the team members and the relationships between them.

The novel is realistic and accurate about laboratory life; the characters are eminently believable. These colleagues are rarely seen honestly to interact in the novel; their thoughts are private and revealed only to the reader by an omniscient narrator – a

²³ I. McEwan, *A Child in Time* this edition (London: Vintage Books, 1987) p. 63.

²⁴ K. Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* this edition (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2005).

²⁵ A. Goodman, *Intuition* this edition (London: Atlantic Books, 2010).

literary contribution to the ambiguity of the situation. The reader, like the characters, is uncertain whether a fraud has been committed at all. In fact, the transgressor himself appears unaware of any problem. He appears to be hopeful, but not sure of his results.

There were times, as well, when Cliff imagined all his good fortune evaporating; the remission of the mice nothing more than a freak occurrence; the idea of using R-7 only a beautiful dream.²⁶

These are hardly the thoughts of a man who has engineered his results dishonestly. The language of the novel is direct. The impressions and feelings of the researchers are shown in detail, but at the same time, the entire novel reflects the difficulties of the interpretation of reportage, its central theme. It is a focused novel about focused individuals, reflected in its prose style. Rarely figurative, the language reflects the seriousness with which the characters approach their lives. At the same time, there are hints of uncertainty and ambiguity that indicate the difficulty of deciding whether a fraud has been committed or not:

Marion cared enormously about her postdocs. They were her academic children, and she only wanted to give the best advice. But she said something just then that devastated Robin. "It sounds as though what you'd really like to do is teach."²⁷

One of the postdocs keeps a lexicon of alternate meanings for commonly used laboratory phrases, highlighting the ambiguity of seemingly precise scientific vocabulary:

Successful grant proposal (idiom): "major disaster. Long-term"
Analyze (verb): "to flounder"
Hypothesis (noun): "highly flawed thinking"
Conference (noun): "cancer junket"
Government Appropriations for Cancer Research: GAC (acronym): "sick tax"
Breakthrough (noun): "artifact"²⁸

²⁶ A. Goodman, *Intuition* this edition (London: Atlantic Books, 2010) p. 48.

²⁷ A. Goodman, *Intuition* this edition (London: Atlantic Books, 2010) p. 101.

²⁸ A. Goodman, *Intuition* this edition (London Atlantic Books, 2010) pp. 24-25.

The scientists fail to notice themselves and sensory impressions are rare. For Goodman's characters are analytical about their feelings, balancing them with their work demands. The characters and the plot reflect very little about the world outside the laboratory. In a claustrophobic environment, - 'like cooks crammed into a restaurant kitchen'²⁹ - multiple viewpoints distribute blame and responsibility differently, implying a lack of control, even in the most senior researchers. The scientists swing from over-confidence to self-doubt. None of them displays a realistic level of confidence in his or her abilities.

In *Breath on Glass* the prose style is more personal. Essentially a story about people, it is mediated by three point-of-view characters, who because of their intimate personal relationships are more revealing of themselves to one another, and more careless of each other's feelings, than the characters in *Intuition*. They are tentative and arrogant by turns. The prose reflects this instability with a more discursive style in the passages describing their interactions with authority, when, essentially, they role-play. A more intimate and personal style is used to describe their private lives.

The imagery in *Breath on Glass* is sometimes scientific. Lewis sees the brain processes of his research team in physiological terms - 'he could sense the crackle of their synapses as the connections were made'.³⁰ It would have been easy for me to turn the novel into a pastiche of scientific writing. Scientific images are readily available to a scientist; phrases such as energy of activation, supersaturated solution, the catastrophic effect of a point mutation, provide the metaphors of everyday life (and conversation). I have been at pains to avoid this and the concomitant alienation of non-scientific readers. Alongside this consideration has been the explanation of the science on which the story is based. Treatises are boring. I sought an appropriate balance here because not-knowing feels dangerous to a scientist. It is in the gaps between observation and understanding that superstition and fear make their homes. In *Breath on Glass* this is exemplified when Rhea realises that she has been working on a mislabelled source of cells and sees the seagulls roosting on the University buildings, believing them to be cliff faces.³¹

²⁹ A. Goodman, *Intuition* this edition (London Atlantic Books, 2010) p. 3.

³⁰ *Breath on Glass* p. 176.

³¹ *Breath on Glass* p. 201.

Science, Literature and Language

In this section I seek to explore the contrasts in the use of language in the literary and scientific contexts and to highlight the difficulties in transferring ideas from one discourse to another.

Some years ago, I wrote a scientific description of the preparation of adipocytes – fat cells to the layman.

The samples were washed three times using Krebs-Ringer Bicarbonate Buffer containing penicillin (100ug/ml), streptomycin (100ug/ml) and fungizone (0.2ug/ml) and the connective tissue and any remaining blood vessels washed away. The remaining adipose tissue was cut into 3mm cubes and 10g of these transferred to a 50ml siliconised glass bottle (Schott, BDH) and suspended together with 10ml KRB buffer containing 4% (w/v) Bovine serum albumin (Cohn fraction V, Boehringer Corp. Lewes) and 1mg/ml collagenase. The bottle was capped and the slurry stirred gently for approximately 1hr. at 42°C using a magnetic stirrer.³²

At the beginning of the novel, there is a scene in which Rhea, one of my characters, carries out this procedure.

Tireless fans forced air into a cataract: an invisible wall that separated Rhea from the sample, half a gram of human fat sucked from the thigh of another young researcher who was having a cartilage repair. The flow resisted her as she pushed her hands inside the tissue culture hood but she pressed forward and breached it, her skin covered by latex gloves and the cuffs of her laboratory coat tight around her wrists.

Inside the hood, she touched the adipose tissue with her scalpel. Gently, gently she stroked it. She knew better than to risk pressing down. Any pressure and the scalpel would give way: not the steel - that was strong - but the plastic handle would snap and the thin blade fly off, lacerating whatever it touched. As she transferred the dissected tissue into the bottle, a drop fell from the lump of fat onto the stainless steel tray of the isolation cabinet. She wiped it away instantly before it had time to spread any infection, but even in those seconds, through the air curtain there was a smell of grease, soon obliterated by the disorienting edge of the alcohol she used for cleaning. She breathed it in and revelled in its contribution to the air of unreality. The enclosed space created an illusion of the

³² J. Cryer, 'Studies on Ovine Adipocyte Precursor Cells *in vitro*' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales (Cardiff), 1993), p. 49.

culture hood as a toy theatre with its brightly-lit stage and its safety curtain. Cellular dramas, miniatures of survival, were played out there as she worked.³³

The Royal Society (of Science) has as its motto “*Nullius in Verba*” which means something like, don’t take anyone’s word for it: in scientific writing the greatest good is that the work must stand alone as a sufficient and exact account, so that it can be repeated by any competent practitioner. The first example above is a piece of such scientific description. It is written in the passive voice because the annihilation of the individuality of the author is the standard operating procedure of scientific writing. There is no point of view in science and anyone writing a scientific description would write much the same thing. When I wrote this piece, I can’t have been paying attention to it because it contains a mistake: the use of the word *gently*. *Gently* leaves room for ambiguity and personal interpretation. One person’s *gently* is another person’s rough treatment.

The same word, *gently*, is used in the second example, from the novel. Here, I feel its use is entirely appropriate. It describes something about the work and implies something about the character performing the action, and it hints at the consequences of not taking care. In story, the author is present, pushing an agenda, manipulating the text in order to manipulate the reader. The record is idiosyncratic and, in the voice of an unreliable narrator, it can be inaccurate.

Francis Bacon, generally credited with being the father of the scientific method, called attention to this role of language, as both an aid, and an impediment to understanding in his philosophical work, *Novum Organum*, in 1620. He singles out words describing qualities as being the most problematic of all:

.....the most faulty are those denoting qualities (except the immediate objects of sense) as heavy, light, rare, dense. Yet in all these there must be some notions a little better than others, in proportion as greater or less number of things come before the senses.³⁴

With this in mind I use *gentle* to describe the scientific treatment that finally delivers Amber’s baby. “The new fertility drug is very gentle...” the nurse tells her patient.

³³ *Breath on Glass* p. 8.

³⁴ F. Bacon, *Novum Organum* 1620, this edition ed. J. Devey (New York: P.F Collier and Son, MCMI, www.forgottenbooks.org) p 33.

“But gentle,” Amber pleaded. “It could be perfect for me.”³⁵ In this instance I use the word as a marker of the remarkable achievements that result from combining science with humanity.

But it is not only the literary writer who has to surmount the problem of language in description. Scientists struggle to find appropriate words to describe new discoveries. For example, Levine points out that Darwin had to find the language to describe his theory of evolution because no such concept had been thoroughly described before; the facile terms that we now employ didn't yet exist. He comments that Darwin's usage changed the words he was obliged to adapt saying, 'But in the very process words like "organism" and "adaptation" and "species" get re-defined by being plunged into history.'³⁶

Unfortunately, the disparity between discourses has continued to be a problem to the current day and a lack of understanding about the separate discourses of science and, for example, politics can lead to misconstruction. Dr. Vanderplank, Director of the Oxford University Language Centre, identified this as the root of the problem, in 2009, between the Home Secretary and Professor Nutt, the then Chair of the Drugs Advisory Committee. In a letter to the Times Dr. Vanderplank said,

The furore over the sacking of Professor David Nutt is an excellent example of how language and discourse may be perceived differently by the various parties to a debate and the confusion that this can cause.....Scientific discourse doesn't work in the same way as political discourse.³⁷

Words may take on a specific identity in a laboratory; they put on their white coats, creating an uncomfortable dissonance for the generalist. *Resolve* carries no connotation of decidedness or settling; it means, explicitly and absolutely, to separate a mixture into its constituent parts. *Precision* and *accuracy* have separate and specific meanings to the immunochemist³⁸, while other words, for example, *transcription* and *translation*, have been plucked from the vocabulary surrounding language to describe the

³⁵ *Breath on Glass* p. 113.

³⁶ G. Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) p. 84.

³⁷ R. Vanderplank, 'Politicians, scientific advisors and the perception of discourse', *The Times*, 12 November 2009, p. 37.

³⁸ C. Davies, 'Concepts' in *The Immunoassay Handbook*, ed. by D. Wilde (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1994), pp. 83-84.

cellular processes of replicating DNA and turning the genetic code into one that can be read as a protein sequence, respectively.

My novel has been an attempt to encompass both these discourses. The theme of this essay is the transformation of science into story. Immediately this highlights the difficulty. The word *transform* means, in general usage, ‘to change significantly’: caterpillars into butterflies, fertile land into desert. In science, however, particularly in the context of cell culture, the word *transform* means something more specific. It means to become immortal. *Transformed* cells will multiply forever. And they will do this because they have become malignant: a cancer, in fact. So the progression of words: *transform*, *immortal*, *malignant*, *cancer*, covers a very wide spectrum in human terms, although a narrow one, the regulation of a particular set of genes, in scientific ones.

With this in mind, I used the word *transformed* in a scene when Rhea is feeling guilty about the way she has treated her sister and imagines her face in a frozen suspension containing Amber’s cells.

The vapour thickened and thinned, Amber’s face glittered down. Rhea recoiled and holding onto the edge of the bench looked back at it. The evanescent shimmer faded, but the face remained. Amber, transformed from warm and soft to hard and cold.³⁹

In this extract, I use the word *transform* in each of the senses I have mentioned. Amber’s life has been transformed twice through her cell line: her financial situation has been changed, she has also become immortal. For Rhea, suffering from remorse, Amber has become a malignant presence, a cancer of guilt to eat her away.

This piece is from the end of the novel, when Amber and Rhea have ‘changed places’, so the scientific terminology is attached to the non-scientist sister and the ‘natural’ terminology to the scientist. In this way I have attempted to add meaning to the language of my novel and to integrate the separate dialogues.

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Porter Abbott points out that for any narrative there exists a variety of possible tellings. At one end of the gradation there is the unadulterated description of the events that actually took place, unmediated by the telling: the Aristotelian *muthos*, which we might describe as the series of plot events. At

³⁹ *Breath on Glass* pp. 203-204.

the other extreme of narrative modes is the *fabula*, the story telling discourse: an approach where the events are heavily freighted to suggest particular interpretations and strongly mediated by point of view.⁴⁰ Scientific methodological writing and the highly individualistic narration of the novel that affects the telling of the plot material stand at opposite ends of this scale.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes what she sees as a difference between the conditions necessary for work in science and literature:

.....for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spiders web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.⁴¹

Breath on Glass places scientific work in the human context: health, money and the houses they live in are crucially important to my characters. They are an integral part of the *fabula* of their scientific lives. But, the scientific work has its narrative too.⁴² Rhea and Lewis, both scientists, approach their work differently and this colours their separate stories.

In the description of the cell preparation, the two extracts that I present above describe the same procedure, and it is important that both should prove true, both in the literal and in the literary sense. For example, in the scene where Rhea prepares adipocytes, she knows that the handle of the scalpel might break if she presses on it too firmly and that she might be cut by it. In the literal sense, it is true - disposable scalpels need a light hand - but it is also true in a literary sense. Because it is a scene at the very beginning of the novel I wanted to give my reader a hint about the story to come - the idea that knowledge is lacerating - and I am saying that although the cutting edge of the science is strong, the people handling it are vulnerable: they may prove weak links and in

⁴⁰ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 18.

⁴¹ V. Woolf, *A Room of one's Own* this edition (London: Penguin Books, 2004) p. 48.

⁴² H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008) p. 19.

fact by the end of the novel, one of the scientists has committed a fraud. In writing this novel, one of my greatest challenges has been to negotiate a parallel honesty between the two discourses.

Rationalism and Emotion in *Breath on Glass*

But a novel, even a novel about science, or perhaps especially a novel about science, can't just be a glorified description of a series of experiments. Primarily, it's a story and in this section I cover the way in which the interplay of rationalism and emotion is treated to create the story in *Breath on Glass*.

A story needs a plot; it needs a setting; it needs characters, real people to drive the action, and the development of these constitutes the challenge to the novelist.

The plot material of *Breath on Glass* could probably be transposed to many settings. It's a story of the conflict between ambition and family life, the rivalry, and the profoundly complicated love that exists between siblings.⁴³ It is also an exploration of the position of the lieutenant, the highly competent individual who is legitimately overshadowed. There are many literary precedents for all of these situations and so I gave some thought as to what might be different about the scientific context.

A laboratory is a gothic space. It is locked; the initiated are admitted, but an electronic key can turncoat and lock you out; a card that has been swiped in the RNA preparation laboratory will bar entry to the PCR (a process sensitive to contamination by RNA) laboratory. White coats and masks depersonalise their wearers and rob them of humanity. You can't eat or drink in a laboratory, so life cannot be sustained in that environment. Humans must return to the natural world, and, on leaving, can't take anything away with them, except for the knowledge in their heads. And yet, a chemical smell clings and marks them out. It's a threatening setting, not one that everyone would feel comfortable in: good for a story.

I have tried to show the way in which science can alienate a non-specialist in this scene where Amber wants to get into the lab, but the door is barred against her:

⁴³ D. Rowe, *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend: Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds* (Hove: Routledge, 2007).

There it was. Seeping through the crack in the doorway, there was that laboratory stench, the constant perfusion of chemicals. It sank into everyone who worked there, marking them out.....Lewis often came home full of the lab, only thinking about work, only talking about work, smelling like that. She filled up the house with her own defenses - perfumed oils lay in wait for him - but still the smell crept in, blotting out her own ambience. She made him shower and change his clothes, but even then it leached out of his skin in bed, and hung about, lying between them. Sometimes Amber even thought that was why she couldn't get pregnant; that smell got in the way somehow.⁴⁴

Naturally, a laboratory is not a threatening environment for a scientist. Familiarity attenuates trepidation and, in other parts of the novel, I have used it as a space that provides sanctuary from the emotional stress of Rhea's private world. As, for example, when she is returning to the city, late at night, after visiting Amber and her thoughts rest on the lab:

The incubators were safe; the temperatures were all running at blood heat, the carbon dioxide levels were just right, all the monitors were green, the alarm systems showing sleep mode. But she knew that Amber would be lying wide awake, goaded by her broken tooth and her empty womb.⁴⁵

Amber, on the other hand, inhabits a rural idyll: Snitter Heugh. *Snitter* is the Old English word for snow and *Heugh* that for a ridge.⁴⁶ It is cold in Amber's environment. Yet in contrast to the laboratory with its air-con and its liquid nitrogen freezers, the cold is a natural phenomenon, and is controllable. Amber installs double glazing. The cold in the laboratory is uncontrollable: both in the literal sense (many samples must be kept cool) and in the metaphysical sense (the work in the laboratory takes precedence over the workers). But Amber's Snitter Heugh is a fantasy world in which she lives without understanding its deceptions. This illusion is indicated in the novel by the passage in which Rhea notices that time seems to have a different frame of reference away from the city. 'Her car climbed out of the city, away from the coastal plain, up towards the hills..... The journey between the two worlds had an unearthly aspect, the reversal of time.'⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Breath on Glass* pp.12-13.

⁴⁵ *Breath on Glass* p. 140.

⁴⁶ S. Beckensall, *Northumberland Place Names* (Rothbury: Butler Publishing, 1992) p. 43 and p. 34.

⁴⁷ *Breath on Glass* p. 131.

Some of the characters in the novel are scientists. Does this make a difference?

Primo Levi, the holder of Nobel prizes for both chemistry and literature, says that it does.

In *Other People's Trades* he talks about his own profession:

The bond between a man and his profession is similar to that which ties him to his country; it is just as complex, often ambivalent. I left the trade of chemist several years ago, but only now do I feel that I have the necessary detachment to see it in its entirety and understand how much it pervades me and how much I owe it.⁴⁸

In *Breath on Glass*, I made a conscious decision to show a difference between the characters who are scientists and those who are not.

Lewis, the most experienced of the scientists, is a consummate rationalist. He plans his career moves and his life as projects. There are elements of life games: the testing of hypotheses for their possibilities, the development of effective strategies. He is a man who understands the persistence and power of hierarchies – he feels his name, Stamfordly, has an aristocratic ring to it – and plans his moves within the power structure of the University, coveting office space, an increased salary and a chair: the traditional badges of formal academic advancement.⁴⁹ In this extract he analyses the characteristics of a group of managers he encounters, evaluating the effect of their behaviour:

They were claiming their boasting rights: that was all it was. Natural and necessary. Figures were being bandied around, gross exaggerations, surely. Lewis could hear them inflating at every telling, and at the same time, the morale of the romancers rising to ever greater heights. The same was true of the rivalry between them: the grosser the achievement, the more exaggerated the performance of those tell-tale gestures. Gimlet glances and the squaring-up postures ballooned as the glasses emptied.⁵⁰

Here, I am drawing an implicit parallel with the masculine environment of the Anglo-Saxon Mead Hall,⁵¹ with its ritual boasting and emphasis on authority, a hierarchical system that Lewis finds surprisingly alive and well in his world of work (for example, in

⁴⁸ P. Levi, *Other People's Trades* translated by R. Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1991) p. 174.

⁴⁹ D.L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2008) p. 164.

⁵⁰ *Breath on Glass* p. 71.

⁵¹ J.M. Hill, 'Social Milieu' in *A Beowulf Handbook* ed. by R.E. Bjork and J.D. Niles (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998), pp. 262-3.

the executive boasting of the Head of Department⁵² and the Vice Chancellor⁵³). He feels secure within its structural certainty and is comforted by the 'baritone clunk'⁵⁴ of his car door when he is confronted by a conflict between his professional and personal life.

When he is under emotional strain, Lewis is less comfortable and he comprehends devastation in biological rather than psychological terms. In this piece, he is in the hospital and his medical colleagues have just lost a child in theatre.

The grieving parents stood close together. In a bolt of unequivocal understanding Lewis realised that the child would never really be gone from this world until the two people who still held the spark of his life were dead too. Those two people, between them, still contained every one of his genes. In a way, the most important thing for them now might be to stay close, to stay alive, so that their son would too.⁵⁵

Here, I wanted to develop a sense that Lewis has touched on something elemental. Something that was present long before humans developed sophisticated forms of consciousness and came before our articulate emotional responses, but holds a solid, empirical power. His scientific habit of looking beyond the visible towards the forces beneath is the beginning of Lewis's appreciation of what it is to be a parent.

His wife, Amber, is anything but a scientist and distrusts everything about the system. Warm and full of life, she is emotionally intuitive and her empathy allows her a great power to sympathise with and love the people around her. The corollary is that she is able to manipulate them, effortlessly. She makes her decisions on the basis of her feelings, linking with human experience, looking out from her home and thinking, 'Vikings had come up that river once, looking for people like her.'⁵⁶ in a way that Rhea and Lewis would not. Although Amber is by far the highest earner in the novel, her world is centred on her life, not her work. She makes sure she shakes the colourless scientists up, rooting her attitude in her earthy approach to life.

⁵² *Breath on Glass* p. 126.

⁵³ *Breath on Glass* p. 178.

⁵⁴ *Breath on Glass* p. 104.

⁵⁵ *Breath on Glass* p. 39.

⁵⁶ *Breath on Glass* p. 142.

She reckoned she was safe behind the fire of her dress, her lippy, the intriguing smear of dark vulnerability she smudged beneath her eyes every morning.Then she shook him off with the most inconsequential shrug of her shoulders. She looked around at the researchers as though she was seeking out support.

“Actually,” she answered, “I sleep with the boss. What were you planning to do to improve your career prospects?”⁵⁷

Amber finds there is a freedom in not being inhibited by academic constraints and while this license gives her liveliness and warmth, it provides a convenient weapon when she wants one: a fact resented by her husband, who doesn’t like being upstaged in his own laboratory.

“It’s the red dress.” She explained it away as though it was nothing to her. “Hot colours are full of energy.” But Lewis had to have the last word.

“Strictly speaking,” he said, “that’s not true. It’s the cold-looking blue light that has the most energy.”⁵⁸

This exchange exemplifies the essential difference between Amber and Lewis, and the allure of their tense and tantalizing marriage. But Amber eventually embraces science and becomes pregnant.

This change in position reflects the pragmatism in Amber’s nature: a willingness to adapt if it is to her advantage. I have tried to indicate, through the use of flashback, key moments in Rhea and Amber’s shared childhood when they might have developed their characteristics. When Amber is faced with the hurdle of meat-eating, she remembers the way that she has always been able to rely on Rhea, for example on her first day at school:

She’d thought she was going to cry, but then she saw Rhea leaning on the gate. She was talking to her friends and without ever looking, held out her hand.⁵⁹

Under stress, Amber trusts Rhea and models her behaviour on her sister’s strength of character. But there are later influences that modulate childhood experience and contribute to the formation of character. As Amber gains confidence in her pregnancy, she abandons the unrealistic idea of protecting her child by turning Snitter Heugh into a

⁵⁷ *Breath on Glass* pp. 16-17.

⁵⁸ *Breath on Glass* p. 17.

⁵⁹ *Breath on Glass* p. 117.

(metaphorical) fortress and moves back to the city with Lewis. She learns pragmatism from her ambitious husband.

The third protagonist, Rhea, Amber's sister and Lewis's lieutenant is burdened by the task of bridging the gap between these two worlds. Like the mustard in salad dressing she is the amphoteric molecule that emulsifies disparate phases. I have demonstrated this by linking her to both Lewis and Amber, in separate incidents.

For example, when she challenges Lewis to a race, she finds it difficult to distinguish herself from him. In this I have tried to show something of the way that joint endeavour can dissolve the boundaries that separate human beings.

Her breath grated, his breath grated, his foot punched, her foot punched. She grabbed at a moment and turned to see where he was and he was staring right back into her face. His eyes locked straight into her eyes. Her heart thumped, or was it his heart? She couldn't tell. She couldn't even count separately from him. Everything about them both pounded together up that track: leg, foot, leg, foot. Neither of them could break free of the bond.⁶⁰

Rhea has Lewis's understanding of science. In fact she is the more dedicated scientist, taking pleasure in the work for its own sake, but she doesn't possess Lewis's understanding of her place in the scientific hierarchy. She feels herself interleaved with Lewis.

When they reached the end of the course Rhea wrenched herself away from him and leaned against the railings, putting her head back so the rain could wash down her. She tasted salt and she had no idea which of them had won.⁶¹

She cannot accept that her efforts are on his behalf and not on her own: the dilemma of the lieutenant in, for example, the traditional story of Tristan and his love for his King's bride, Isolde. Wagner's musical interpretation of the story involves 'the Tristan chord' an unresolved, atonal fragment that represents the impossibility of resolution in Tristan's situation. It is with this lack of opportunity for personal fulfilment in mind that I wrote of Rhea's life.

⁶⁰ *Breath on Glass* p. 55.

⁶¹ *Breath on Glass* p. 55.

Throughout most of the novel, she denies her own emotions, regarding them as selfish or a sign of weakness, so that they are often ignored. Rhea has accepted so much responsibility for Amber's happiness that she privileges Amber's well-being over own feelings:

Now, Rhea couldn't even remember the visit to the hospital; the very last time she ever saw her father slipped from her memory, but she hadn't forgotten the walk across the flat, grassy park towards the beach and the long distance from which she saw Amber.⁶²

When Rhea begins to draw close to Lewis, she remembers how much Amber depends on her.

(Amber) opened her arms, as wide as they could stretch, and she ran and ran over the scrubby turf towards her sister, as though her entire world had been set to rights.(Rhea) knew that no-one would ever be so pleased to see her again.'⁶³

Eventually, this loyalty is stretched beyond its limit by Amber's demand for her sister's services as a surrogate mother. Rhea uses her scientific ability in analysis as a coping mechanism. 'She swallowed once, twice, hard rolls of effort to free the muscles. They must have been constricting the internal carotid artery because she felt faint.'⁶⁴ This time the ploy fails; Rhea is overcome. She has already begun the process of separating herself from Amber.

When Lewis and Rhea touch the elements of life and their work succeeds, the energy that this generates means that they also touch a Jungian archetype: the sleeping princess. Rhea showered with her eyes closed because she had become disengaged from her own body. But the body is still there. It saves her, when her mind wants to destroy her sister,⁶⁵ and she feels it again through Lewis's agency. 'Now she felt her own body through Lewis' fingertips. Her thoughts were Lewis's thoughts.'⁶⁶ She is awoken by another person and, initially, there is a feeling of rightness rather than guilt when she begins an affair with her sister's husband.

⁶² *Breath on Glass* p. 48.

⁶³ *Breath on Glass* p. 48.

⁶⁴ *Breath on Glass* p. 158.

⁶⁵ *Breath on Glass* p. 155.

⁶⁶ *Breath on Glass* p. 162.

In describing these developments, I wanted to say something about human bonds that are hard to break. And in explaining my purpose, I have used bonds as a metaphor for an emotional state that is difficult to define. Every year cognitive neuroscience produces startling new insights into the way that we think. Limitations on thought processes are mirrored in language, especially in the development of novel metaphors. Charles Fernyhough suggested that novelists should be especially aware of current developments in cognitive neuroscience when they write about their character's thoughts.⁶⁷

Stephen Pinker points to the use of metaphor as necessary for our ability to engage in abstract thought, suggesting that metaphor is a system that the mind can use to encompass the unfamiliar, citing examples such as 'The atom is a solar system' and 'An antibody is a lock for a key' as material to our understanding of these concepts.⁶⁸ He also uses examples from literature, for instance, Ian McEwan's description of composing music in *Amsterdam*⁶⁹ to illuminate the power of metaphor to enable the understanding of a complex mental process, thus demonstrating the value of metaphor to both science and literature.

Solution is a word that we use both in science and in everyday conversation to describe two separate things. Lakoff and Johnson describe a particularly elegant metaphor developed by a student who, on hearing the phrase 'the solution of my problems',⁷⁰ imagined the mind to contain a seething, chemical solution of problems which, under differing conditions, sometimes precipitated out, and at other times, were reabsorbed into the solution. It is a wonderful example of the fruitfulness of cross-fertilisation between art and science, one well worth striving for.

Scientists are no strangers to metaphor. It has been suggested by Steven Mithin in his work *The Prehistory of the Brain* that science only became possible following the development of hypothesis testing, tool making and the mastery of metaphor and analogy

⁶⁷ C. Fernyhough, 'What's on Your Mind?', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2005, Review Section p. 22.

⁶⁸ S. Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought* (London: Alan Lane, 2007) p. 241.

⁶⁹ S. Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought* (London: Alan Lane, 2007) pp. 277-278.

⁷⁰ G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980) pp. 143-144.

by humans.⁷¹ In *Breath on Glass* the scientific project is analogous with the plot. An overarching trope in the story is the study of cells and the environmental factors that determine which parts of their genetic potential are actually expressed. As the researchers manipulate the cellular environment, they are manipulated themselves by factors within and without their control.

In the same way that I couldn't stop saying *gentle* when I wanted to describe the handling of something that is both living and fragile, my scientists can't stop being human beings, with all their intrinsic complications and complexities, and that makes them part of their experiments. The cell cultures are strictly biologically determined; they don't choose their responses. They respond to environmental stimuli in a genetically fixed manner. And yet my characters, conglomerates of these programmed cells, apparently exhibit free will and self-consciousness.⁷² Porter notes that some theorists consider that without these attributes, there is no meaningful story.⁷³ To consolidate the links in my metaphor I used the theories of philosophers who are interested in addressing these problems in the light of current developments in science.

Emotions are mediated by biochemicals. For example, Weitz provides a medical view of the neurophysical events underlying the plot of *Tristan and Isolde*.⁷⁴ But, while these phenomena provide an explanation for physical reactions such as blurred vision or death, they do not provide a sufficient one for the responses of the lovers to their feelings of love and despair. Our understanding of the mechanics of human biological heritage sits uneasily with our belief that our feelings are real and that we have the freedom to respond to them. A current hypothesis in this area is yet another aspect of evolution. Daniel Dennett postulates that freedom of action is compatible with a physically and biologically determined world saying that it is 'an evolved creation of human activity and beliefs, and it is just as real as such other human creations as music and money.'⁷⁵ He claims that 'if

⁷¹ S. Mithin, *The Prehistory of the Brain* this edition (London: Phoenix Orion Books Ltd., 2005) pp. 244-246.

⁷² D. C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin, 2003) pp. 2-3.

⁷³ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 19.

⁷⁴ G. Weitz, 'Love and Death in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* – an epic anticholinergic crisis', *BMJ*, 327 (2003), 1469-1471.

⁷⁵ D. C. Dennet, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 13.

we accept Darwin's "strange inversion of reasoning" we can build up to the best and deepest human thought on questions of morality and meaning, ethics and freedom.'⁷⁶

While recognising that our knowledge of ourselves is now so extensive that it can be overwhelming, he exhorts us to face our realities bravely, saying 'Look around at those who are participating in this quest for further scientific knowledge and eagerly digesting the new discoveries; they are manifestly not short on optimism, moral conviction, engagement in life, commitment to society.'⁷⁷

My characters are youthful and full of this sort of hope. To a scientist it is heartening to be allocated such a position, rather than being placed under a constant pressure to defend science against the claim that it is invariably transgressive. In associating the Gothic with the breaking of boundaries, Botting states that: 'Gothic excess.....the fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries continue to produce ambivalent emotions and meanings in their tales of darkness, desire and power.'⁷⁸ In this literary arena, the terrors of un-natural knowing are scrutinised. The un-Gothic science and the philosophy that tries to make sense of our new knowledge are not explicit in my novel - it is meant to be a story and not a treatise - but they are implicit: they informed me; they informed the world of the story and provide a basis for the individual self-determinism of each of my characters.

Lewis and Rhea, the characters most closely associated with the determined cells are the least open to change. Lewis is deeply embedded in the University hierarchy and sees his developmental path as a steady progression along this traditional route, already identifying strongly with his professional role. Rhea is less committed, but she resists influences outside of her work, dismissing Amber's friends thinking, 'She had no idea what to talk about, what would interest them.'⁷⁹ She harbours prejudices about other people, for example, Stephen Glatton, not seeing him as he is, but through a paradigm that suits her purpose.⁸⁰ Education and experience has made these characters somewhat inflexible. Amber, on the other hand, retains her plasticity. She changes her environment, she leaves her job, and, crucially, she changes her mind, accepting both fertility treatment

⁷⁶ D. C. Dennet, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 307.

⁷⁷ D. C. Dennet, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 5.

⁷⁸ F. Botting, in *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom*, ed. J. Drakakis (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 2.

⁷⁹ *Breath on Glass* p. 132.

⁸⁰ *Breath on Glass* p. 76.

and a move back to the city. It is her cells that produce the stem line, literally and metaphorically.

Perhaps this determinism is the reason that scientists are still objects of dislike in literature. In *Arlington Park* by Rachel Cusk, one of her characters, a teacher of literature, harbours a marked antipathy towards scientists. She is setting up the library for the literature club where the students are going to discuss *Wuthering Heights*.

There was always a sixth former at a table in the corner who looked as though she had been there for a year, slumped over in an irremediable swamp of paper and chemistry books.It was always the scientists who were the worst. They had a sort of maleness about them, an aura of election.⁸¹

As she makes these interlopers leave, 'She felt she was, in a sense, on the front line, defending art from the barbarian forces of rationality.'⁸²

Art needs no defending from the forces of rationality. Rationality needs no defending from Art.

In *Breath on Glass* I have sought to place science and literature side by side 'in the tiny realm created by the light box'⁸³ and to show that they work comfortably together.

⁸¹ R. Cusk, *Arlington Park*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) p. 153.

⁸² R. Cusk, *Arlington Park*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) p. 153.

⁸³ *Breath on Glass* p. 118.

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